DISCIPLE OF THE LICH
OR HOW I WAS CURSED BY THE GODS AND DROPPED INTO THE ABYSS!
NOVEL 2
WRITTEN BY Nekoko
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara

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"First Dragon go boom!"
PHILIA
KANATA
DISCIPLE OF THE LICH
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KOTONE
POMERA
"Laelaps's Fang!"
LILY
"Humans, humans... Ahh, so weak, weak."
"Guillotine of the Mad Queen!"
ROSEMONDE
"Get wrecked! Ground Bomb!"

"But if I talk with him, and he says that blonde girl is his girlfriend...I'm not sure what I mi is is exactly the reaso ke the robe and com , I think I'll erve."
"Going full-on stalker then, huh?"
LUNAÈRE
NOBLE MIMIC

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

Disciple of the Lich: Or How I Was Cursed by the Gods
and Dropped Into the Abyss! Vol. 2
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DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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Chapter 1:
Manaloch, the City of Magic

—1—

A WEEK AFTER I DEFEATED the Evil Priest Notts, Arroburg was finally starting to settle back into a routine.

It was public knowledge that the humanoid dragon had come to the city and cast the terrible barrier spell that came so close to killing everyone. People also knew that he had been lurking inside Lord Grand's mansion when he cast the spell. The only piece of the puzzle still missing was the matter of Grand's complicity. Most people were choosing to believe that he had been a victim in the scheme, rather than a willing participant.

"But that's not true, is it?" asked Pomera as she sat next to me in the back of a horse-drawn wagon.

"I'm not entirely sure," I replied. "Grand was dead by the time I found him. But from what Notts said, it sounded like Grand tried to cut some sort of deal before he was betrayed."

"Why would everyone assume he was innocent?"

"Because besides you and me, no one knows for sure…and it's more convenient for everyone if Grand was a victim instead of a villain. The lord coming to take Grand's place is one of his relatives. If the king thought Grand might have had a hand in the attack, then his entire family would be suspect. They might even be executed."

After chatting with other adventurers at the Guild for the past week, I'd learned that the king took a very dim view of treason. And it was within his rights to punish Grand's entire family just to make an example of them. It might send a strong message to kill the whole lot, but if leadership wasn't restored soon, Arroburg would descend into chaos. The situation after the attack was already bad enough, so maybe it was better to just look the other way.

Even so, I doubted that anyone was willfully trying to cover up the truth. Only one person knew for sure what had happened in the mansion, and I wasn't telling anyone.

"I still can't believe it though…" muttered Pomera. "I can't believe that Notts summoned an evil god…and you managed to defeat it so quickly."

"To be fair, it wasn't a god. Notts summoned a homunculus. His ancestors were alchemists, not priests. Over the years, they just started acting like they had religious authority because the power was too good to pass up. Anyway, we shouldn't be talking about this too much in public. Things could get complicated for us if someone overheard," I said with a glance toward the driver's seat.

After all the trouble in Arroburg, Pomera and I decided it was time to hit the road. With Grand gone, Arroburg's Adventurers' Guild was effectively shut down, and there wasn't much incentive to hang around the city. Better to let the past be the past and make a fresh start in a new town.

We were headed to somewhere that might have the resources we needed—the City of Magic, Manaloch.

After all of our power-leveling work, we were running critically low on elixirs. Arroburg's selection of alchemy ingredients was just terrible, and there was no way we could get back on a serious training program until we made more Blood Ethers of the Gods. For a few minutes, I had even contemplated going back to Cocytus. While I ultimately decided that would be too extreme, we still needed those elixirs so Pomera could keep learning new spells and gaining levels.

No matter what, we needed to keep power leveling Pomera. She was barely at the point where Lovis wouldn't pose a threat, not to mention Notts. People of that strength weren't particularly common, but they were out there. Pomera needed to keep stacking levels for her own safety.

And so, we joined up with a caravan headed to Manaloch.

Passage between cities was potentially dangerous with all the monsters lurking around Locklore. So, adventurers, merchants, and townsfolk would band together to make the trip in relative safety. Adventurers provided the muscle in case anything went wrong, and merchants paid handsomely for the protection.

I had been ready to make the trip with just the three of us, since I was sure that nothing out on the plains could pose a threat to us. But after her rise to fame as Saint Pomera in Arroburg, a group of merchants tracked my partner down and asked her to accompany their caravan. They were going the same direction that we wanted to travel in, and they were willing to pay us to ride along. That sounded like a good deal to everyone involved.

"Kanata! Kanata! There's a huge birdie outside!" said Philia excitedly as she pulled back the wagon's curtain and peered out.

"Kanata, how long do you plan to keep that little girl with you?" asked Pomera, suspiciously eyeing Philia, who was playing next to me. "Since it's you, I know you must have a good reason…but it just seems weird. It's like you're hiding something. I mean, how exactly did you meet her?"

"It's, uh, tough to explain. All I can say is that I can't leave her alone her right now," I said.

I couldn't very well have left her in Arroburg. We'd worked too hard to save the town to leave it to that kind of fate.

Philia looked like a cute kid, but she was actually Zolophilia—ancient homunculus and God of Terror, resurrected by the Evil Priest Notts. His ancestors had placed her under a curse that removed her free will so they could make her into a god, but my Karma Breaker spell had removed said curse. That left me with a grade-schooler who could cast Gravity Bomb when she got annoyed.

“Ph-Philia, don’t lean out! It’s dangerous! The wagon is moving really fast!” said Pomera, reaching out to pull Philia back from the window.
The wagons in Locklore were astoundingly quick. The transportation industry used high-level horses to pull cargo across long distances at speeds that rivaled cars and trucks back in Japan. I was pretty sure I could run even faster, but I wasn’t going to turn down a ride.
“Kanata, you need to keep a better eye on Philia. She’s so full of…curiosity. She could hurt herself if you aren’t paying attention,” scolded Pomera.
“She’ll be fine,” I said.
“F-fine?!”
Heck, Philia could fall out of the wagon and I don’t think she’d even feel it.
When we’d fought in Arroburg, I’d cut her to pieces and she’d just kept regenerating and coming back for more. If she took a tumble, she’d probably just chase along behind us like it was some kind of game.
The sound of a whistle coming from the rearmost wagon cut our conversation short. Our wagon pulled to a stop and the driver popped his head inside to talk to us.
“That’s the alarm from the monster’s shell. Sounds like we’ve got trouble. Saint Pomera, if you don’t mind tending to it.” The merchant bowed his head.
“Please stop calling me that! It makes me feel very uncomfortable…” said Pomera, her face growing red.
“Oh, I’m sorry. I had no idea…”
“Yes, please don’t call me that. Besides, Kanata is so much stronger than me.”
“Is that so?” the merchant looked at me dubiously. “I just thought he was your attendant or something.”
“I-I’m just a normal adventurer!” insisted Pomera. “Everyone is just exaggerating the story of what happened!”
She was only right in a relative sense. Both Philia and I were far more powerful than Pomera, but she was head and shoulders above any other adventurer on the caravan.
“Let’s go,” I said, pulling back the wagon’s curtain and shooing Philia outside. I was hoping to get Pomera away from this uncomfortable conversation as quickly as possible.
“Shouldn’t the little girl stay in the wagon?” asked the merchant.
“Well, she’s the kind of kid who gets into trouble unless I keep tabs on her,” I said with a lame grin as I lifted Philia onto my back. He didn’t seem to buy it, but I didn’t stick around to argue the point. I walked toward the rear of the caravan as Pomera came running after us.
“Kanata, are you sure you should be taking Philia with you?” Pomera kept her voice at a whisper. “I can’t imagine you’d fail to protect her, but you never know what might happen.”
“I’m more worried about what would happen if I left her behind.”
“What exactly do you think she is…?”

Oh, just a level 1,800 homunculus with the power to shapeshift into any form she wants and the self-control of a fifth grader.

“Philia’s super strong!” said Philia proudly with an unconvincing curl of her bicep. Pomera looked at her with only worry in her eyes.

I looked around. All eight wagons had come to a stop, and adventurers were running to the last one in the line. A pack of fanged apes—large, white-haired gorillas with huge canines—were doing battle with anyone who approached. It was my first time seeing them, but I’d heard details at the Guild. They were extremely territorial D-rank monsters who liked to chase down caravans and attack them on open terrain.

But we had plenty of adventurers; this fight was not going to be a tough one.

“Let’s just take out our fair share of the monsters without standing out too much,” I quietly suggested as two of the apes rushed toward us.

We could have taken care of the whole group without breaking a sweat, but that would have blown our cover. Since we were trying to keep a fairly low profile, we just needed to pull our weight and keep people from complaining.

A thought occurred to me. “Since you’ve got the opportunity, why don’t you try practicing your spirit magic in a real battle, Pomera-san?”

Spirit magic was cast by borrowing power from local spirits of the land. It was fiddly and took longer to cast than other schools of magic, but a skilled user could cast higher-level spells than their level might normally allow, as well as use up less of their magic power in the process. A few low-level opponents would make perfect target practice.

“O-okay! I’ll try it out!” Pomera gripped her staff tightly. “Spirit Magic Level 8: Salamander’s Claws!”

A wave of fiery claws launched toward the apes. They carved deep, blackened gouges into the ground and engulfed one of the monsters in flame before slashing its body into two halves. The burning remains collapsed to the ground, smoldering.

I heard a commotion from caravan. Someone had noticed her wanton display of power.

“Maybe you should have used a slightly lower-leveled spell,” I said.

“I-I’m sorry…” Pomera began to apologize before frowning with a huff. “I-It’s at least half your fault that I can’t control my strength.”

While Pomera stared at me with narrowed eyes and red cheeks, the remaining fanged ape lunged to attack. As it leapt through the air, it opened its jaws menacingly to show its terrible fangs.

“Spirit Magic—” Pomera began to form a magic circle, but the monster was too close for her to finish.

“Eeek!” She panicked and instinctively thrust her staff forward.

“Grargh?!”

Pomera’s staff pierced the ape’s chest. With her eyes squeezed shut, she whipped the staff and the attached ape over her shoulder. The hapless

monster’s head slammed into the ground, smashing it open and spraying blood and brains across the roadside.
“Th-that was close… It scared me.” She shook the blood and bits off her staff. Then she sadly muttered, “I’m not sure I even need magic anymore.”

“Don’t say that! What if you find yourself surrounded by level 300 opponents?” I warned.
“I-Is that even possible outside of the Cursed Mirror?” asked Pomera.
Technically, that was *only* possible outside the Cursed Mirror. All the horrors that lived in the Warped Realm were well over level 3,000. Pomera didn’t have Status Check, so she had no way of knowing, and I didn’t think it was a good time to clarify.
“Anyway, good job, Pomera-san. Looks like the rest of the adventurers have the problem in hand. Let’s head back to the wagon,” I said.
“Philia wants to fight too!” whined the girl on my back, winding herself up to throw a tantrum. “It’s not fair! You’re only saying nice things to Pomera!”
Just as it seemed like we had victory in the bag, I sensed an overwhelmingly evil presence making its way toward the caravan. The apes has just been a distraction as it moved in on us.
“Something’s coming…” I said as I drew my sword.
The surface of the ground broke open and a pitch-black spider scuttled up from the earth. It was about the size of a dog and had a single glowing red eye.
I closed in and swung, slicing the spider in two and turning its body to powdery brown sand that blew away in the breeze.
“Its level wasn’t that high…” I muttered. The Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh tended to turn most low-level enemies into dust. It was a really cool effect, but inconvenient when trying to collect monster parts to sell at the Guild.
“Yay, Kanata! You’re so awesome!” cheered Philia, still clinging to my shoulders.
“Wh-what happened, Kanata?” asked Pomera as she walked closer to look at the hole in the ground. “It’s rare for you to draw your sword outside of the Cursed Mirror…”
“Well… I had a really bad feeling and wanted to be extra cautious…”
I sheathed my sword and took a knife out of my magic bag. Usually, I used it for skinning monsters or extracting items from them, but it would do as a weapon for now. Fighting barehanded drew too much attention. It also had a tendency to get really messy if I couldn’t properly pull my punches.
“A bad feeling? I’m not sure what that monster was, but it looked like some sort of burrowing spider. It was creepy, sure, but was it really that dangerous?” asked Pomera.
“I think I can sense more of them still underground…”
Screams erupted around us. At least fifty spiders surfaced in a sudden wave, surrounding the gathered adventurers.
“A monster stampede?! Wh-why is this happening here?” cried Pomera.
These monsters evidently worked as a pack. But I was surprised that Pomera didn’t seem to know what they were—I would have expected monsters with this level of coordination to be common knowledge for adventurers. I used Status Check on one of the distant spiders.

Race: Ragno
Lv: 24
HP: 91/91
MP: 84/84

So would a group of them be a bunch of ragnos? I thought to myself, but that sounded funny. What about a bunch of ragni? Yeah, that's better.
Anyway… They were right around the same strength as a D-rank adventurer. Most of the adventurers in the caravan were D-ranked, and that meant we were badly outnumbered.
If I took care of the problem single-handedly, I risked drawing the attention of travelers from other worlds or another humanoid dragon. But I couldn't just stand there and watch adventurers die to keep my secret.
"We've got to reduce their numbers and give the others a fighting chance," I said.
"U-understood!" Pomera readied her staff. She seemed like she was planning to cast a spirit magic spell with a wide area of effect.
A group of about twenty ragni were warily coming our way. Maybe they were being cautious because I'd killed their scout.
Good.
"We'll cut these down quickly, then split up to help the other adventurers!"
From the corner of my eye, I saw Philia raise her arms high while still riding on my back.
A rainbow danced through the sky before turning into a dragon with green skin and a red, root-like pattern running across its scales. I'd seen it before. From its large wings to its wicked claws, this was Drigvesha, the dragon that I'd faced in Grand's mansion. It wasn't wearing a mask, but it was definitely one of the forms Zolophilia had taken.
"Philia-chan, wait! Calm down! Make that go away!" I cried.
"First Dragon go boom!" Philia dropped her arms and the beast swooped toward the spiders. It rent the earth, shredding any ragni in its path.
"Look at what Philia can do! Philia's amazing, right?" She waved her arms up and down while giggling.
I stood there frozen, my hands covering my face.
When I laid out my plan for Pomera, Philia must have thought I was talking to her too. She all too happily jumped in on the action.
The other ragni realized that it was time to run, and they stopped fighting to flee back underground. As they did, the dragon faded into a shimmering light and disappeared.
Then the other adventurers started panicking.
"What… What just happened?!"
"There was a dragon! We have to get away from here immediately!"
If the adventurers scattered now, the merchants and townsfolk they left behind would surely panic too. For the sake of the caravan, I had to try and get the situation back under control.

“C-calm down everyone! It looks like the dragon’s gone!” I shouted loudly to the other adventurers, but I didn’t see any signs of them calming. I was trying to figure out what to do when an older male adventurer turned to us.
“Was that a spirit you summoned, Saint Pomera?” he asked.
“Wh-what?!” she replied. She had frozen in place where she stood, her staff raised. Everyone went silent and focused on her.
From the position of her staff, it looked like Pomera had been in the middle of casting a spell. The man clearly assumed that was how the dragon had appeared.
“U-uh, uh…I’m sorry! I don’t even know…umm, uh…” Pomera managed to stammer before the sound of cheers and applause filled the air. Pomera’s face turned bright red and she cringed under the weight of the attention.
I felt bad for her, but at least no one was panicking. I controlled my expression and started clapping like everyone else to keep up appearances. Philia clapped too, but I don’t think she knew why.

—2—

CRISIS AVERTED, the caravan continued on its way to Manaloch.
“I’m really sorry, Pomera-san. It looks like you ended up with more attention than you bargained for,” I said to Pomera as I bowed.
“It’s all right.” Her expression seemed caught between different emotions. “A-actually, I have no idea if it’s all right or not.”
In the past few days, she’d become the hero of Arroburg for healing the people of the city and destroying Notts’s barrier. Now she was being credited as a master summoner who could call forth a massive dragon spirit.
“It’s just…who, or what, exactly is Philia?” Pomera looked at the little girl uneasily.
I needed to tell the truth; otherwise, it would be really hard to keep adventuring together while keeping Philia’s secret. The cat was halfway out of the bag, but I wanted to make sure Philia was okay with me telling Pomera before I did.
As usual, Philia was entertaining herself by looking out the side window. I looked in her direction and cleared my throat. She turned to face me and smiled sweetly—it was cute, but also kind of unsettling.
“Philia-chan, I’d like to tell Pomera-san about you. Is that all right?” I asked.
Philia’s smile disappeared, replaced by a thoughtful expression.
She seemed to be considering her answer. I had no idea what memories remained after five thousand years spent as Zolophilia, the God of Terror. If she had any, they surely weren’t good ones.
Philia’s face lit up with a smile again, and she scooted across the bench to cuddle beside me.
“Philia-chan, did you hear me?” I asked.

She looked back at me, before saying with a grin, “Philia doesn’t know anything about this complicated stuff. Kanata can decide everything for Philia!”
Notts’s ancestors really did a number on her. I wasn’t entirely sure if she understood what she was. Maybe it was comforting to have me around to make tough decisions for her, no matter how high her level might be.
Then she sort of fell over, leaning onto me. She closed her eyes and sighed comfortably, worn out from the excitement of the fight. Maybe I was overthinking this. In any case, she’d given her permission. I could make this choice to tell Pomera what she needed to know.
“Philia-chan is a person…from a long time ago,” I began. “Notts’s ancestors sealed her away, but she came back when we fought in Arroburg.”
“Huh…?” Pomera’s eyes grew round.
“Notts was planning to use Philia-chan to destroy the kingdom. He forced her to fight against me and it almost caught me off guard. I still won, but she gave me a run for my money. At least for a few minutes.”
I’d never expected she would grow four copies of me during that fight.
Pomera was silent, her mouth agape.
“Pomera-san?”
“If she could keep up with you even a little, doesn’t that make here a horrifying monster?”
“Pomera-san, what do you think of me?”
Pomera clamped her hand over her mouth, mortified by what she’d just said.
“Philia-chan has no intention of fighting now,” I continued, trying to take the pressure off Pomera. “Thousands of years ago, Notts’s ancestors placed her under curse so they could control her. I removed that, though. She has her own free will now.”
“Yeah, but…a-are you sure it’s okay?” Pomera asked, looking uneasy.
I understood why Pomera was afraid. I’d mulled over what to do about Philia the night I faced Notts. I had been unable to bring myself to kill her, and leaving her behind would’ve been like leaving a time bomb in Arroburg. The only responsible option was to bring her along.
Philia let out a soft sigh, and her head slipped sideways onto my knee. She seemed comfortable and smiled in her sleep. Pomera wasn’t a fan of the situation, but her expression softened at the sight.
“I understand why you’re uneasy, but I can’t just abandon her,” I said.
“I suppose you’re right,” said Pomera with a small nod.

—3—

THE REST OF THE WAGON JOURNEY was largely uneventful. Five days after setting off from Arroburg, another city came into view, with pointed roofs peeking over the tall city walls.

“That’s Manaloch, isn’t it?” I asked.
“I guess so,” said Pomera. “I’ve never been this far from Arroburg. It looks like a place that would have a lot magic stores and research groups, though.”
“Hmm… Lunaère-san would probably like to come here too,” I murmured to myself.
The city was amazingly beautiful, and I wished I could show it to her, but she had that unholy impurity to worry about. It just wasn’t realistic for her to come here in person. That was a shame.
“Kanata?” said Pomera, and I snapped back to reality.
“Eh, sorry. I was lost in thought for a second there. Did you say something?”
“No. I mean…it’s just, this Lunaère was your magic teacher, right?” Pomera’s voice seemed mistrustful as she asked.
“Yeah. Not just in magical theory, but in how to fight using magic and a sword as well. Why do you ask?” Maybe she thought I was making it all up.
“No reason, you just seem so…*passionate* when you talk about Lunaère.”
“She did save my life.”
“And you’ve said she’s a lady, right? How *old* is she?”
“A thou—” I caught myself before I gave her true age. I wasn’t sure how much Pomera knew about the undead, but knowing that she was a thousand years old could give away that Lunaère was a lich. As much as I wanted to tell Pomera the truth, that wasn’t a rumor I wanted to start. I rethought my answer. “I think she’s around eighty.”
“Oh! She’s getting up there then.” Pomera sighed in relief.
I felt like I’d just dug a hole for myself without meaning to. But it wasn’t like Pomera and Lunaère would ever meet each other in person. I figured it would be fine.
“Why do you ask?”
“O-oh! No reason. Just curious.” Pomera’s face turned red and she looked away, but she seemed satisfied. And that was the most important thing.

—4—

A SHORT TIME LATER, we reached Manaloch, and the caravan broke up as the various merchants and adventurers went their separate ways.
“Thank you so very much. I am so glad you traveled with us, Pomera,” said a merchant as he bowed his head to her again and again.
“I-It’s no big deal. I’m not anything special…” Pomera shrank away from even light praise.
“And you’re so humble! To think we had a hero like you in Arroburg all this time!”
Pomera’s cheeks glowed bright red as she glanced at me for help. I couldn’t do much, given the situation. There was no way I could explain what had really happened in Lord Grand’s mansion, or how Notts had summoned a

man-made God of Terror. I felt bad for Pomera, but I also really wished she wouldn't get so anxious every time she got a little attention.
"Pomera looks like she's in trouble…" murmured Philia, holding onto the sleeve of my robe. She seemed oblivious to the fact that her summoned dragon was half of what had put Pomera in this situation to begin with.
"Philia-chan, I'm happy you used the First Dragon because you ended up saving people," I whispered, "But please don't use the dragon again where people can see it"
"Sorry… Philia got excited, but she understands." She hung her head and buried her face in my robe. "Philia won't use the First Dragon where people can see."
"I'm glad you understand." I stroked her head.
I was relieved. It was good if she could keep herself from tossing out the First Dragon in situations where we might stand out. It was even better if she understood why I was asking her to do that.
Some of the other merchants and adventurers were starting to gather around Pomera.
"Please let us express our thanks as well!"
"If you weren't there, we would never have made it to Manaloch in one piece!"
"N-no, no, I didn't do anything…" Pomera blushed and she started to panic. The situation was turning into her own personal nightmare as more and more people gathered to thank and praise her.
"Hey, half-elf girl!" said a man in robes and a pointed black hat as he approached Pomera. Given the quality of his gear, I guessed he was a C-rank adventurer or higher.
"To be honest, I thought the stories were all baloney. I got to Arroburg just after things went down and heard all about how a low-level adventurer removed the Evil Priest Notts's barrier and saved hundreds of people in the city. I laughed and thought everyone in that city was a moron. But jeez, turns out I'm the one who was an idiot! You really saved our bacon in that caravan."
"Ah! Well…o-oh dear!" Pomera was working herself into a full-on panic attack.
I decided it was time to get us away from there. I clawed my way through the crowd and took Pomera by her arm.
"Shall we go see about that urgent business, Pomera-san? Remember, we've got some *urgent business*, right? Thank you so much, everyone!"
"Wait, I've got something I need to talk about with Pomera!" said the man with the pointed hat.
I dropped my shoulder and pushed a path through the crowd, Pomera hurrying along in my wake. Philia followed as well, running along like she was having fun. We jogged for a little bit before we stopped.
"I think we're clear," I said.

“Kanata, how long is this situation going to last?” asked Pomera as she wrung her hands pathetically.
“I’m really sorry, Pomera-san. I thought for sure it would get better once we left Arroburg…”
We heard a cry of joy from nearby. Pomera jumped in surprise at the sound and looked around warily.
By coincidence, we’d stumbled across the Adventurers’ Guild, and now people were pouring out of the guild hall to greet a tall man with long blond hair as he approached.
“Alfred! You’ve returned after completing your mission!”
“Were you able to defeat the red troll?”
“Come now, no need for all this commotion,” the blond man—Alfred, apparently—replied. “Taking on two red trolls all by myself isn’t that big a deal.”
“What?! You defeated *two* red trolls?!”
The cheers increased in volume.
“Please don’t block Alfred’s path, we’re very busy!” said a swordswoman at Alfred’s side. She tried to shoo the surrounding adventurers away.
“All this fuss over a couple measly red trolls,” complained Alfred. “This city isn’t what I expected. To think I was excited to hear there was an S-rank adventurer in Manaloch… But now I’ve learned she’s half-retired. Pah! Her level probably isn’t as high as I had hoped either.”
He seemed pretty strong, but his arrogance was off the charts.
“I know it’s not about me…” Pomera puffed a sigh of relief as she pressed on her beret. “…But this is also kind of embarrassing to watch.”
I really felt bad for her. She was so traumatized that now she was getting worked up watching someone else get praise.
While she was having sympathy anxiety for Alfred, I decided to try and sneak a Status Check on the big adventurer. I still wasn’t sure if people could detect when I used it on them, but with the huge crowd gathered outside the Guild, I was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to trace it back to me.

ALFRED ALGOBERT
Race: Human
Lv: 76
HP: 274/289
MP: 243/266

Huh, he’s not that big of a deal…
It turned out he wasn’t even half Lovis’s level. Seriously, *Lovis*! The more I used Status Check, the less I understood the standards of this world.
“What’s wrong, Kanata?” Pomera saw my befuddled look and knew something was amiss.
“Oh no, it’s nothing. Really.”

—5—

WE FOUND A SET of rooms to rent and took a few hours to settle in. Then I took Pomera and Philia on a trip around Manaloch to try and find ingredients for the elixir. While that was a critical task, I had to admit that it was fun just walking around the city and looking at the streets lined with tall buildings and pointed roofs. Manaloch had a really mystical atmosphere that made it a blast to explore.
“Oh look, there’s a cat-shaped weathervane! Or perhaps I should call it a weather*cat*!”
“I still don’t really know what you’re looking for, Kanata, but it’s bound to be here somewhere. This place is considered the holy land for magic users,” said Pomera.
“I want ingredients for that elixir, the one I called a Blood Ether. I wasn’t able to find the right items back in Arroburg.”
“Ether? I’m not sure which one that was…”
“It’s the green potion I gave you in the Mirror,” I said.
Its full name was the Blood Ether of the Gods.

BLOOD ETHER OF THE GODS
Value Class: Legendary
An elixir. Active ingredient: concentrated brain matter of high-level demons.
It is said to have a composition similar to the atmosphere in the gods’ realm, and it is rumored than an arch-mage once discovered hidden truths of this world after drinking it.
The drinker receives increased spell efficiency and greatly recovers MP.

Lunaère had given me a ton of them when I left Cocytus. They both recovered your magic power and sharpened your focus. As long as we had a steady supply, we could keep firing off spells in the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm with no downtime at all. It was perfect for power leveling. During my training, I’d drunk so much of the elixir that I managed to poison myself.
“Oh. That.” Pomera rubbed her stomach with a pained smile. “Yeah… You made me drink them until my belly got all sloshy.”
“Without them, we can’t keep raising your level in the Cursed Mirror.”
Pomera’s expression tensed. She hesitated for a moment before saying, “K-Kanata…I thought we were done raising my level?”
“Huh? Oh, no. We’re just taking a break because I was running low on elixirs. Don’t worry, we’ll start again once we settle in.”

“D-don’t you think my level is high enough? I’m already *over* level 200…” Pomera pointed a shaking finger at herself.
“You can probably get by as an adventurer around level 200… But if you’re attacked by Lovi—er, *a bandit* outside the city, you might be in over your head. We need to raise your level as quickly as possible.”
Lovis wasn’t at level 200, but he traveled with subordinates. Pomera needed to be at least level 250 to be able to hold off a group of those jerks without trouble. And there were plenty of dangerous people with a higher level than Lovis.
They weren’t common, no, but in the short time since I’d left Cocytus, I’d fought Lovis, Notts, and Zolophilia. Zolophilia had even jumped up to level 3,000 at the end, but I was pretty sure that was a special case that I’d never run into again. In other words, if Pomera was level 3,000, I wouldn’t have to worry about her at all.
“Bandits?! Assuming my understanding is correct, someone around level 200 would be an epic warrior known throughout the region.”
She wasn’t wrong. Lovis was sort of famous…he had wanted posters, anyway.
“Philia wants to drink ethers, too!” said Philia, bouncing around in excitement.
I had a sudden mental image of her chugging ethers like juice boxes while chain-casting Gravity Bombs inside the Mirror.
Philia was already level 1,800 and her idea of playing a game was summoning an ancient dragon. To top it off, she seemed to be able to learn any spell merely by observing someone else while they cast it. I wanted Philia to be safe…but I also wanted to keep the city safe from her. Maybe we could power level her when she demonstrated a little more self-control.
“Th-they don’t taste very nice,” I said, trying to dissuade her.
“But Philia wants to try them!”
“…All right. Once I get some made, I can let you have a little sip. Okay?”
“Promise, Kanata? Yay! Promise!” Philia giggled happily.
“What are the ingredients for the ether?” asked Pomera.
I took the Acacia Memoirs from my magic bag and flipped through the pages. To look up something new in the grimoire, I had to have the object right in front of me. But if I needed to reference something I’d looked up before, all I had to do was think of the item and the book would open to the right page.
I used my finger to hold the page open while showing Pomera. Philia craned her neck to look too.
“The main ingredient is the brain of a demon. We can get plenty of those in the Cursed Mirror. Other than that, I need this …”

SAP OF THE SPIRIT TREE
Value Rank: A

A drop of sap from Yggdrasil, the World Tree, said to be the source of all spirits.
It has a powerful healing effect and is valued for its alchemical uses. It can be obtained by making a pact with a high-ranking spirit who has received permission from the Spirit King to reside within the tree.

"And we also need to find this…"

ADAMANTINE ORE
Value Rank: S
An ore with shining streaks of a purplish hue. Adamant is said to be the strongest naturally occurring material known to the human world. It is resistant to all types of magic.
The ore forms naturally along ley lines as metal nodes are exposed to high levels of magic over extended periods of time.

"I'll need some other stuff, but these are the probably going to be the toughest to find. Everything else I can substitute, if that becomes necessary," I said.
Pomera's face grew serious as she looked at the pages of the Acacia Memoirs. "Sap of the Spirit Tree and adamantine ore…?"
"Yep. If this place is the holy land for magic users, then they're bound to be here somewhere."
"M-maybe. Umm, but those ingredients seem really specific…" Pomera looked around the street with uncertainty. "Well, let's just look around first. I've never been to Manaloch before. Maybe they do have it."

—6—

I DRAGGED POMERA AND PHILIA into yet another magic shop, the Witch Ring. It had rows of fancy glass cases showcasing necklaces and other items. There hadn't been any sort of doorman, but almost immediately, we started to get the feel of the place. All the other customers were obviously very wealthy, and a pair of adventurers with a little girl in tow drew a lot of stares.
"K-Kanata, did we all really have to come in together? I feel like we kind of stick out…" Pomera tried to hide behind me as she walked.
I wanted to tell her she was worrying too much, but I was getting a bad vibe as well. There were whispers and giggles. Other customers glanced at us with disgusted expressions before heading to a different floor of the store. If I hadn't been dead set on getting the ingredients for the Blood Ethers, I probably would have left immediately.
Before this, we'd been to three other shops with no luck. One of those shopkeepers had indicated that this store had the best chance of stocking

the things I was looking for, so we'd made a beeline for the Witch Ring. I hadn't expected it to be this high-end, though.
"Wow! Pretty!" Philia seemed oblivious to the hostility and made a move to snatch a necklace from a display stand. I quickly grabbed her arm as gently as I could.
"Not here! Not now!" I whispered desperately and heard a snicker from another customer nearby. Pomera was right; I should have come in alone.
Someone cleared their throat. Looking up, I saw a woman with blue hair so dark it looked almost black. A pair of silver glasses were perched on her nose, and on her ultramarine robe was a badge of blue crystal, emblazoned with a golden ring.
"My name is Riva. May I assist you in finding whatever it is you're looking for?" she curtly asked.
"I'm sorry for the noise…" I said with a bow, and she let out a huff.
"And I'm sorry that you've wasted your time by visiting the Witch Ring. I don't believe that traveling adventurers such as yourselves appreciate the true value of our goods. The objects here are curated and prepared for the researchers of Manaloch—who, day in and day out, toil to uncover the secrets of alchemy." Riva seemed annoyed as her arm swept to indicate the glass cases. "Perhaps I can direct you to a suitable general goods store?"
"Well, I'm looking for something specific…" I said.
"Fine, what is it then?" asked Riva with disdain.
"It's…an ore."
Sap of the Spirit Tree was something I might be able to find while adventuring, provided I could make contact with the right spirits. Adamantine ore, on the other hand was going to be tougher. I had no idea how mining worked in Locklore, but I was sure that an S-ranked mineral was probably easier to buy than it was to find.
"An ore, you say?" Riva sighed heavily and turned away from us. "This way please."
I bowed slightly and followed Riva. In turn, I was followed by Pomera, who looked like she was getting close to another panic attack. Philia still seemed in high spirits and paused to gawk at anything shiny, much to Pomera's dismay.
"The Witch Ring's policy is to attend to all customers, no matter how clueless or rude—even if they're goblins. If you believe you have business here, then we must strive to provide appropriate service." Riva flatly recited as she led the way.
I wonder if it's the Witch Ring's policy to compare their customers to goblins?
Eventually, she stopped in front of a glass case and spread her hands over it with a bored look on her face.
"All our ores are in this case. Have a look," she muttered.
I saw a sparkling blue stone, about an inch in diameter.
"Oh, is this what you were looking for? This is—"

“Blue Moon,” I said. It was an ore with a pale blue shine. It was everywhere in Cocytus. I’d nearly been flattened by a boulder of the stuff while gathering dinner ingredients with Lunaère once.
“Y-you’ve heard of it. Well…it will make our conversation move more quickly. As you can see, this shop deals solely in high-end items. I’m sure whatever you are looking for barely compares—”
“If I remember correctly, Blue Moon is only a D-rank item. I was hoping for something more…”
Riva didn’t say anything, but her expression soured.
I had a terrible feeling that I’d said the wrong thing. But this was a high-end magic shop; surely they had high-end items? D-rank wasn’t particularly impressive. If the Witch Ring didn’t have adamantine ore, then I didn’t know where else I was going to look. My goal to make more elixirs was starting to seem unachievable.
“Uh, so the thing I’m looking for… I was actually looking for something a little bit higher ranked…” I said.
“Excuse me?” A crease appeared between Riva’s eyebrows.
“W-well… Maybe you have a case in the back or something?”
“It’s so pretty! Kanata, Kanata! Philia wants this, it’s so cool!” said Philia, her eyes locked on a necklace with a Blue Moon gem set in it.
“Well, it can’t be that much, I could probably buy it for you,” I said, leaning in for a better look. The price tag listed it at 340,000 gold. There was no way that could be right, so I leaned in closer to read it again. “Whoa! They’re charging how much?! For Blue Moon?!”
That would blow through all our savings. It was a pretty necklace, but over three hundred grand felt like a rip-off for a D-rank gem. If it sold at that price, I wished I had filled a magic bag with the stuff while I was still in Cocytus.
In fact, it occurred to me that if this was a fair market price for Blue Moon, then I needed to consider pawning off some of the magic items I’d collected over the past few weeks. I wasn’t about to sell the items that Lunaère had given me, but the Lovis’s compass was fair game. It was just an A-rank item, after all.
“K-Kanata, I think you may have said that a bit too loudly…” Pomera’s whispered warning shook me out of my thoughts.
I looked up and saw Riva’s face was bright red, her nose crinkled in rage as she glowered at me.
“S-sorry! The shop is wonderful, and I’m sure that your prices are very fair!”
“Get out, you ignorant ape!” Riva grabbed a wand from a nearby and started to wave it at me.
Didn’t she just say she’d even provide service to a crude goblin a few seconds ago?!

“Let’s go!” I grabbed Pomera with my left hand while pinching the wand between the fingers of my right hand. I gently twisted the wand from Riva’s grip and dropped it to the floor without breaking it.
I quietly congratulated myself on my increasing skill at holding back as I pulled Pomera and Philia from the Witch Ring.

—7—

“EVEN THE HIGH-END SHOP only deals in D-rank items…” I muttered dejectedly as we walked through the streets of Manaloch.
We’d visited a few other shops since we had nothing to lose, but still no luck. And here I’d thought I had a handle on the standards of this world, but it turned out that *D-rank* items were valued super highly. What kind of epic collection had Lunaère been maintaining?
“Um… Have I been drinking an incredibly high-value potion like it was water?” asked Pomera in dawning horror.
I tried to do some quick math. Blue Moon, a D-rank item, was worth 340,000 gold once you set it in a necklace. Let’s say you doubled the price with each rank, then considering the ranks went F, E, D, C, B, A, S, Legendary, then Godly…a Legendary item like the Blood Ether of the Gods would be insanely expensive.
“Well, I don’t know exactly how much they cost. Maybe ten million gold each?” I said without thinking, throwing out a number I thought might be in the ballpark.
Actually, that meant selling off a few items might be a bad idea, if I was trying to avoid the attention of travelers and humanoid dragons. I wasn’t sure any of these shops even had the cash on hand to buy something like that.
“Ten—t-t-t-ten million?! I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry!” Pomera started to hyperventilate and dry heave from the shock. “I had no idea they were that valuable! I’m sorry, I’m so, so, so sorry!”
“I-It’s okay! I’m just guessing the value. And besides, they’re just potions I got from Lunaère-san!”
As I spoke, it hit me that I possibly owed Lunaère somewhere over a hundred million gold. I also had a number of Godly items that I had accepted from her, like the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm.
How am I ever going to pay her back?
“K-Kanata, what kind of person is Lunaère, exactly? I can’t even believe that she could be more powerful than you are… And she had all these incredible items…” said Pomera.
“Lunaère-san is, uh, a hermit. She doesn’t really want anything to do with the outside world, so I’d rather not spread too much information about her.”
A hermit and a *lich*. Going around bragging that I had been trained by an undead immortal with an aura of unholy impurity probably wouldn’t make

me many friends. I didn't know much about the local church, but I knew I'd rather stay on their good side, let alone put Lunaère on their radar.
"Kanata, you really care for Lunaère, don't you? You always seem so concerned for her. That must make an old lady like her very happy," Pomera said with a gentle smile.
"I-It's a bit rude to call her an old lady!" I said, suddenly offended.
"Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry!" Pomera clapped her hand over her mouth as her cheeks turned pink.
Then I remembered that I'd told Pomera that Lunaère was eighty years old.
"Sorry, i-it's not a big deal," I said, clearing my throat and trying to play it off. I made a mental note to try and keep my story straight in the future.
"That's okay, Kanata. I just… I feel like there's something you're not telling me about Lunaère. I-I understand that she might not be the kind of person who's exactly open about everything." Pomera squeezed her staff and looked at me dubiously.
I grinned uncomfortably. I didn't like the direction this conversation was going.
"Kanata, Kanata! Philia wants to go look at clothes!" Philia said, grabbing the sleeve of my robe. Her eyes sparkled as she pointed to a store in the distance with her free hand.
What a save! Her timing couldn't have been better. Had she bailed me out on purpose?
"All right, let's go, Philia-chan. Maybe we can find something affordable to buy. We might as well give up on finding those ingredients anyway," I said.
"Yay! Philia loves you, Kanata!" she said, hugging me around the waist. I patted her head as I peeled her off, then we headed toward the clothing store.
Pomera huffed, unsatisfied with my explanation. Either way, she quickly follow along.
Then she stopped, and her entire body shuddered.
"What's wrong?" I asked.
"I-It's nothing. I just…shivered? Maybe I'm coming down with something," she said, looking uncertain.
Philia's eyes opened wide. She brushed off my hand and jumped in front of us.
"Philia-chan?" I felt a presence in the distance a moment later. It was unsettling, yet somehow familiar.
With their face obscured by the hood of a heavy, black robe, an unknown figure stood on the roof of a tall building in the distance. Magic formulas written in blood-red characters blanketed their garment. The meaning of the characters was obscured by the extreme distance, but I could tell at a glance that this was the work of a high-level magic user.
Pomera seemed to be sensitive to whatever aura the mysterious figure was giving off, possibly because she was a half-elf. For her part, Philia probably

noticed it because she was a homunculus—made of magic and attuned to its flow. Either way, the girls had a much keener sixth-sense than I did.
The figure stared down at me, not moving an inch. Hair like white silk fluttered under the robe's hood.
Before I could react, Philia raised her hands and faced the magic user on the roof.
"Philia-chan, calm down!" I begged, but she was fixated on her target. Her expression was no longer that of an innocent girl—it was filled with focus and caution.
"Kaboom!" Philia clapped her hands together.

The roof heaved and transformed into a giant red and green face beneath the black-robed stranger. Even though this maneuver was possibly about to give us away, I couldn't help but stare in awe at the power of the Sand of Dreams. I could barely believe that Philia could affect such a large structure so quickly.
The roof-face stretched its mouth wide toward the sky, then swiftly snapped the magic user between its jaws.
"Got 'em!" said Philia with a satisfied smirk. But an instant later, the magic user reappeared from the giant head's blind spot. From Philia's perspective, the giant had eaten the magic user, but they had dodged at the last moment.
"Philia-chan! Stop that right now!" I shouted.
The magic user stretched a hand out of their sleeve, then pulled off their glove between their teeth. They poked the giant face lightly with two fingers, and it went slack, unable to move, as if it were paralyzed.
Philia's whole body rocked, almost falling to the ground. I swiftly caught her before she fainted.
"Ugh… Sorry, Kanata. Philia's tired…" said Philia, cross-eyed. She went limp in my arms.
She seemed unharmed, but this was an important lesson: both the giant and her human body were undoubtedly Philia. She shared her HP and MP pool with whatever she summoned using the Sand of Dreams. In other words, any status effect used on one of her summoned forms affected her main body too.
Rainbow light danced around the giant's reddish-brown face as it slowly morphed back into another part of the roof. Some of the city's residents screamed at the sight and pointed at the figure standing on the peak.
"K-Kanata, isn't Philia an incredibly high level?" asked Pomera, fear in her voice.
She was. But whoever was standing on that roof was clearly in a whole other league.
On top of that, the stranger seemed to understand that Philia and the giant face were connected. That was the only reason I could think of to explain why they'd used such a strange fighting style to incapacitate Philia; they'd effectively stopped her from shifting more energy into her summoned manifestation. Either they knew about the Sand of Dreams already, or they had figured out what was going on exceptionally quickly.
Moreover, whoever it was, while they were incredibly powerful, they had held back and opted for a relatively gentle victory in lieu of causing Philia lasting harm.
The magic user took the glove from their mouth and slipped it back onto their hand before turning to face me. Then they leapt from the roof, disappearing from sight.
I dropped my eyes to Philia. She was down for the count, but she didn't seem hurt.

“Sorry, Philia-chan! Pomera-san, take care of her for a moment! I’ve got to find out what’s going on!”
“Y-you want me to look after Philia?!” cried Pomera in bewilderment as she hugged Philia to her.
“Yes! Besides, I don’t really think that person means us any harm. I think they just reacted when Philia attacked without provocation.”
I was certain that person could have really hurt Philia if they wanted. Besides, I felt like I knew them. Their height, their hair…they were an exact match for Lunaère. I had to get to the bottom of this.
If they had been any closer, I might have been able to make out Lunaère’s signature red fade at the tips of her hair. If that *was* her, it explained a lot—the absurd power, the unsettling aura, and the high-level robes. I just hoped Philia’s preemptive strike hadn’t angered my favorite lich.
I still had a hard time believing Lunaère would leave Cocytus, especially after what she’d said when she sent me away. She’d lived in the dungeon for a thousand years, and I doubted that she would suddenly decide to take a stroll on the surface for no reason at all. And what was with the black robes and long-distance surveillance? This was shaping up to be quite the mystery.
I rushed to the base of the building where Philia had summoned the giant face. I couldn’t sense any aura and had no idea which direction the mysterious stranger might have gone.
“Did you see that creepy person standing on the roof just now?” said a passerby, “Where’d they go?”
“Is this some fight between two adventurers?” asked another.
Seemed like the locals were just as clueless as I was. I needed to go up higher. Running up a nearby wall, I climbed onto the roof. Still no signs of the magic user, and the trail went cold.
“Maybe it wasn’t Lunaère-san…” I muttered to myself. She wouldn’t have a reason to attack me *or* a reason to run away. Maybe I had just zeroed in on the tiny details that happened to match because I missed her and wanted to see her again.
But if the figure wasn’t Lunaère, that meant we had caught the attention of someone more powerful than Zolophilia. I didn’t know if they saw us as enemies, but this wasn’t an ideal situation. I should have gotten closer right away and used Status Check to see their level. Next time, I would. I doubted this was the last we’d see of our new friend.
That Alfred had said something about an S-rank adventurer in the city, but that she was retired. Maybe the figure had been her.
Then I started to hear voices from below.
“H-hey, did you just see a guy run up that wall?”
“I think you’re seeing things.”
“But there’s a footprint right over there!”
Not good. I hadn’t thought things through because I’d been convinced the stranger was Lunaère. We’d worked hard to keep a low profile, and I had

possibly just flushed it down the drain. It was time to get down and go back to acting normal for a while.
“Short Gate.” I formed a magic circle and dropped into a vacant alley before setting off to find the girls.

—8—

PHILIA STILL SEEMED unsteady as she leaned on Pomera for support.
“What happened, Kanata?” asked Pomera.
I shook my head. “I lost them. They’re most likely more powerful than me, so it’s a good thing it didn’t end in a fight.”
Pomera’s face paled as I spoke. “D-does a human like that even exist?” she gasped with a cry.
Philia’s eyes had been closed, but she jumped at the loud noise.
“There are plenty of people stronger than me,” I said, a bit miffed that Pomera still thought I was some sort of freak. “People’s levels just tend to be at either extreme. Lunaère-san always told me I should be on guard, since I’d never know what sort of danger I might encounter.”
The average adventurer seemed to be below level one hundred, but there were people like Philia or the black-robed stranger who were around my level, or even higher. Not so many in the middle, though.
That didn’t mean I’d never encounter danger. I had learned the Twin Minds Method for the specific purpose of being able to hold my own against high-level threats, but I preferred to avoid fights when possible.
“That’s just…uurgh.” Pomera stumbling over her words as she tried to come to terms with the idea.
“We don’t know if they’re hostile to us, but we should be on the lookout just in case,” I said.
Philia had attacked because she overreacted. It was possible that would lead to an unnecessary confrontation in the future. We needed to prevent misunderstandings, and it occurred to me that it might be a better idea to leave Manaloch before we drew any more attention.
Regardless, a magic user with that kind of skill was probably famous. I figured it shouldn’t be hard to find information about them. Still…I couldn’t shake the feeling that they resembled Lunaère. I needed to confirm their identity.
“Are you giving up on gathering ingredients then?” asked Pomera.
“Yeah…” I said dejectedly. “I don’t think there’s any point in continuing to look here in Manaloch.”
In order to get high-ranked items, I’d probably have to make a lot of connections with high-level adventurers or head back to Cocytus to find them myself.
That’s when I heard some people talking as they passed behind us.

“Did you hear they’ve developed a new alchemy spell? It’s hugely impacted the way the Mithril Wand prices things.”
“So what? It’s not like we can afford high-end stuff now.”
“Jeez. Have a little ambition.”
I stopped in my tracks and faced them.
“Excuse me! Could you tell me about this Mithril Wand?” I asked.
“Huh? You’re in Manaloch and you’ve never heard of the Mithril Wand?” asked a tall, thin man with a snort of derisive laughter.
This city had an attitude problem.
“Well, all right,” he continued. “The Mithril Wand is the most advanced alchemy consortium in the city. They even sell goods to the public—partly out of the goodness of their hearts, partly to keep funding their research. Getting their products in adventurers’ hands also helps advance their agenda. No one else can even compete.”
I’d been worried that he wasn’t going to tell me anything, but once he got on a roll, the information came spilling out.
“That sounds like an incredible group…” I said.
“You have no idea, buddy!” he said with a patronizing smile. “There’re tons of people who come to Manaloch just to see the Mithril Wand. Based on your robes, I’d guess you’re a magic user too. Surprising…”
“Sorry, I’m new in town…” I said, shrugging with embarrassment.
The short woman who was with the man slapped him lightly on the arm.
“Don’t act so full of yourself. It’s not like you’ve got a connection with the Mithril Wand.”
He shot her an annoyed glare.
Huh, the Mithril Wand sounds kind of exclusive. Maybe they would have the ingredients I need. But if they did, the cost would porbably break our budget. Still, there was no harm in checking it out and asking for a price.
“Um… So where is this store of theirs?” I asked.
“It’s just down that street,” said the woman, trying to cut the conversation short. She seemed in a hurry to be somewhere else.
The man, on the other hand, stepped over. “Today’s your lucky day, pal. I’m going in that direction, and I’ll show you the way.”
“Really? That would be helpful. We’re feeling pretty lost,” I said.
“Yeah, leave it to me,” said the man with a smirk.
“You’re a real jerk, Kevin. You know that?” called the woman. The man just grinned and waved back at her.
“Hey, I’m on the level! This guy just wants to go to the Mithril Wand, so I’m being an upstanding citizen and taking him there. You go on ahead.”
The woman gave Kevin the stink-eye, but she looked away when I met her gaze. She turned to head off in a different direction.
I feel like I’m missing something.
“Are those two with you too?” asked the man with a look toward Philia and Pomera. Pomera was looking at me pensively.
“They are. But, uhh…” I started.

“Well, have them come along too, then. It’s not like I’ve got all day,” said the man.
“O-okay,” I said, with a small bow of my head. I motioned for the girls to follow.
“Thank you so much, uh…” I started.
“You can call me Kevin,” he said.
“Kevin-san, thank you for showing us the way. My name is Kanata, this is Pomera-san and this is Philia-chan,” I said, indicating the two behind me. Philia happily gave a big wave, but Pomera just frowned, looking somewhat uneasy.
“No need to thank me. Actually, most people who go to the Mithril Wand are high-class magicians. Can’t hurt to be owed a favor or two, am I right?” said Kevin, turning to us with a loaded grin.
“Ah… Of course, we’ll repay you if we ever get the chance…” I said.
“C’mon, I’m just yanking your chain. Relax.” Kevin looked satisfied at the sight of my uncomfortable smile, then turned forward again. I wanted to believe he was a good person, but he was starting to rub me the wrong way. Still, humanity would be done for if people couldn’t accept the generosity of others. Probably.
“K-Kanata, are you sure about this guy? He makes me a little uncomfortable…” Pomera whispered in my ear. I tried to look confident, but Pomera eyed Kevin with uncertainty.
It should be fine… This seems like a busy and safe part of town. I don’t get the impression he’s taking us to some shady alley.
On the way, I had secretly used Status Check on Kevin, and he was at best a D-rank adventurer. I didn’t think this would turn into a problem that I couldn’t solve.
Eventually, we came to a tall tower that had been elegantly whitewashed. A large clock with carved reliefs of angels was set high up on the building.
“Here we are. This is the Mithril Wand, the very heart of Manaloch. Only people with connections to the consortium can get past the lobby.”
“It does have a majestic feel,” I said.
Two shining statues of silver griffons were perched on either side of the doorway. Kevin said this was a store, but it didn’t seem the kind of place where customers just walked in off the street. In fact, very few people were coming and going from the building.
Can we really go in? I don’t think we belong…even if it does seem like the kind of place that has what I need.
I glanced behind me. Pomera looked like she wanted to leave immediately.
“It’s so pretty! It looks fun!” said Philia. She’d clearly regained her energy after recovering from that altercation a few minutes ago.
“What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to go in?” asked Kevin.
Pomera was silent, but her eyes met mine and shouted, *Let’s stop here!*
“W-well, actually…” I stammered.

“Seriously? I went out of my way to lead you here,” said Kevin, with a playful smile that didn’t extend to his eyes.
Pomera, being Pomera, gave me a look that said, *Tell him no!*
“I was thinking I’d just ask them if we could have a tour of the place,” I lamely mumbled.
“Oh, really? Well, let me see you to the entrance,” said Kevin with a creepy smile.
“K-Kanata!” Pomera whispered as she moved close to me. “I don’t think we’ll be welcome here! This guy is just trying to make fun of you.”
“I’m sorry,” I whispered back. “I just don’t know how I can turn him down. And if he really is just being nice—”
“I’m certain he isn’t!”
“Well, I get that feeling too! But wouldn’t you feel weird making a fuss and leaving after he’s come all this way?”
Pomera’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, and she looked up at me glumly. “Kanata, you walk right into these problems, don’t you?”
“Sorry. I’ll go in alone. You can just wait nearby.”
“If you’re going in, I’m going in too.”
“I really am sorry…” I bowed my headed slightly to Pomera.
Kevin was grinning as he watched, but he looked away quickly as soon as we turned back to him.
“Philia wants to touch those statues!” said Philia. At least someone was enjoying herself.
We passed between the statues and quietly entered the building. Inside, a woman in a gray robe stood behind
a reception counter. Her robe was embroidered with a bluish-white wand.
“Are you members of the public?” she asked as she looked warily at our ragtag group.
“Oh, I’m just their guide,” said Kevin with an obsequious smile as he took two steps back. The receptionist looked at him with annoyance. Then she turned her gaze on me, Pomera, and Philia with a sigh of absolute disinterest.
Ugh, another setup.

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“DO YOU INTEND to purchase anything today?” asked the receptionist.
“Y-yes. But I don’t have very much money on me at the moment. I was hoping I could just browse a little…” I said falteringly.
“May I have the name of the alchemist you’ve scheduled a meeting with?”
“Uh, I don’t have one…”
“The general public may only enter if they are attended by a member of the Mithril Wand,” said the receptionist, her tone indicating that she said this several times a day and wished she could just put a sign on the door.

I glared at Kevin.
“Did you intend to enter the Mithril Wand with that child?” she asked, looking at Philia with vague disgust. “There is no explicit rule against it, but that just won’t do. I will have to ask you to leave her outside.”
Philia jumped in surprise. She grabbed my robe and tried to hide behind me by squeezing herself smaller. Then she took a deep breath as if to steel herself against a grave challenge.
“Philia will wait outside,” she declared.
But the way things were going, I didn’t think any of us would be getting in. We didn’t have an appointment, and I didn’t think we’d be able to just grab a passing alchemist and make one on the spot. Our only choice was to leave and get away from Kevin as quickly as possible before he could embarrass us any further.
“Do you have a pass for entry?” the receptionist continued. “If not, you’ll need to submit an application for review. You should have the results in a week.”
“And if we pass the review, we’ll be allowed in?” I asked. Even if it might take a while, perhaps there was a glimmer of hope in the middle of this prank. Maybe we could actually get into the Mithril Wand. A week was a long time, but it wasn’t like we had other plans.
“Well, members of the public that wish to enter must obtain a special recommendation or be at least a B-rank with the Adventurers’ Guild. Although meeting either requirement doesn’t mean you are certain to pass the review.”
B-rank or higher? Pomera and I are still only C-rank.
We only needed to raise our rank by one, but that was easier said than done. Ranks in the Guild were determined more by results than by your strength. Even if we worked hard, it could take *years* to move up. And even then, our application to the Mithril Wand wasn’t guaranteed.
“Something wrong?” Kevin pounced on the opportunity to gloat. “Are you going to apply? You wanted to head to the Mithril Wand as soon as you heard it was the most advanced alchemy research institution in Manaloch, so I assumed you were some sort of famous magic user.”
What a jerk! The nerve of is guy, to go all this way and guide us just for the chance to make fun of us.
Philia started to level her arm toward Kevin, her expression blank. I quickly put my hand on her wrist and gently pushed it back down. As gratifying as it would be to watch Kevin eat a Gravity Bomb, it would bring down the building too.
“I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware of how things worked here. I apologize for wasting your time,” I said with a bow toward the receptionist.
“Hey, hey, you’re giving up pretty easy. I guess that’s what I’d expect from a country bumpkin pretending to be a magic user. While you’re at it, you can apologize to me for wasting my time too,” said Kevin, cutting in.

Just as I was about to respond, the door opened and a heavyset man in a robe stormed into the room. He looked to be around fifty years old with a face carved deep with wrinkles, but his eyes had a fierce, strong-willed glint. A coarse white beard dominated his face, and magic necklaces hung around his neck, while his wrists were covered in magic bracelets.
The receptionist jumped and stood up straight. “Welcome back, Mr. Garnet. How was your business at the Adventurers’ Guild today?”
“I wouldn’t know—I was busy elsewhere. One of my assistants handled it,” he said, gruffly.
This Garnet fellow seemed to be someone important within the Mithril Wand. He carried himself with a certain dignity that was just shy of intimidating. Pomera, Kevin, and I all instinctively stepped back out of the way so he could walk past. Philia was the only one who remained where she was, entirely oblivious.
“His beard looks crunchy,” said Philia. I quickly grabbed her shoulder and pulled her to the edge of the room.
He turned to face Pomera, who had bowed and quickly stepped away to make room for Garnet to pass. However, he just stepped with her, so he remained standing in front of the white mage.
“Well, it looks like my search has reached an end,” said Garnet. “A little bird told me you were seen coming to the Mithril Wand, and it seems like my timing was perfect.”
“O-oh… D-do you have something you’d like to speak with me about?” Pomera trembled and tried to shrink into her beret.
Garnet stared at her for a moment, then nodded deeply. “I heard about you from a subordinate of mine who recently returned from a trip, Saint Pomera. To think, the savior of Arroburg—a magic user who is as powerful as an S-rank—would come to our humble city of Manaloch. I am honored to make your acquaintance.”
Kevin gaped in surprise. Pomera’s eyes pleaded with me for help.
“I’m not sure why you’ve chosen to visit the Mithril Wand. To be honest, I have no specific business with you. But…I was hoping we could speak so I could get a feel for what kind of person you are,” Garnet continued with a warm smile.
“O-oh, I’m not really all that special, um…” stammered Pomera. She seemed utterly lost for what to say.
Garnet clapped his hands together happily. “Wonderful! I heard you were quite modest, and I’m happy to see the rumors are true. Though I think you may be a bit too humble, Miss Pomera. There aren’t many in this country who could defeat a humanoid dragon. Even within Manaloch, I can only think of one other who would be capable of such a feat.”
The more Garnet spoke, the paler Kevin and the receptionist turned. Sweat began to pour down their faces.
“I-I think something else forced the humanoid dragon away. I just limited the damage he caused. There are so many people who are much more

amazing than me… Like over there," said Pomera with a desperate glance at Philia and me.
"Hmm… Well, there must be some extraordinary reason for someone so powerful to remain yet unknown to the world. But I have no intention of making any undue assumptions, so please, don't worry. I apologize if I've caused you any discomfort," said Garnet with a few bobs of his head, followed by Pomera's sigh of relief. "To be honest, I wanted to confirm that you weren't a danger to the city. I would be remiss in my duty as an administrator if I didn't. I assure you, I had no other intentions in mind, and I am quite relieved to find you to be trustworthy."
That seemed reasonable. If a town elder suspected a person with S-rank abilities had entered the city, they'd probably want to take the measure of their character as soon as possible. If the relationship between that adventurer and the city turned sour, there might be serious consequences.
"O-oh, I see…" said Pomera, trying to bring the conversation to a close. She seemed to be debating if she should mention me or not.
If my true level was known, it might make me a target for anyone trying to make a name for themselves. The same went for Pomera. Anyone coming after her would be in Lovis's league, whereas anyone who knew my level would need to be as powerful as Zolophilia or Lunaère. I felt bad that Pomera had to worry about that—but by keeping my level a secret, I could act as her ace in the hole and protect her if anyone decided to take a gamble.
Anyway, the people who knew about her were pretty few and far between outside of Arroburg. I didn't think that this encounter increased our general risk level by all that much.
"Pomera," said Garnet, "did you and your companions come for a pass to enter the Mithril Wand? We can't let suspicious characters come and go as they please in the heart of Manaloch. Normally, application reviews tend to take some time. But…for convenience's sake, you can use me as your reference and cut down the hassle. How does that sound?"
I gulped. It was a suggestion I could have only dreamed of.
"Well, we weren't aware of the rules here. It seems non-members like us can't even apply unless we're B-rank adventurers…" murmured Pomera, and Garnet's expression's darkened.
"I see, so you refused them an application?" Garnet turned and glowered at the receptionist. "Miss Pomera seems agitated. Did you say something rude to her?"
"N-no, sir! I was just explaining the rules! I never expected this to happen!" The receptionist was trembling visibly.
Garnet narrowed his eyes, but his smile quickly returned when he faced Pomera again. "I do apologize, Pomera. There are quite a few…elitists in Manaloch. They often give visitors the cold shoulder. I hope you haven't been offended," he said.

I couldn’t argue. We had visited a lot of different shops dealing in magic items, including the Witch Ring, and none of them had been particularly friendly. Their pride in the city’s magical prowess had made them downright arrogant.
“Hmm, so your Guild ranking isn’t that high?” Garnet asked Pomera. “Well, that won’t be a problem. We’ll just make an exception. I want to do everything I can to ensure you have a long and pleasant stay here in Manaloch.”
Garnet’s tone was completely different from when he had addressed the receptionist. As he spoke to Pomera, his voice was filled with warmth. I wondered if authority made people gravitate toward emotional extremes.
“Kanata, you’d like to go in, wouldn’t you?” Pomera asked me.
I nodded meekly. Honestly, I was incredibly excited. If we couldn’t get the A-rank Sap of the Spirit Tree and the S-rank adamantine ore here, then we’d probably have no choice but to find them ourselves.
“All right. Mr. Garnet, if it’s not too much trouble, I would like to accept your offer. Not just me though, I would also appreciate it if Kanata could join us as well…” said Pomera.
“Of course, of course. Your three companions are welcome to join us!” said Garnet with a smile and a nod.
“Sir… The child too…?” the receptionist asked hesitantly. Garnet silently glared at her. She took the hint and bowed. “N-never mind!”
Regardless of the circumstances, it looked like Garnet was going to get us into the Mithril Wand. I let out a sigh of relief, then realized something was amiss.
“W-wait, three companions?” Pomera asked. Apparently she had noticed that, too.
It sounded like Garnet thought Kevin was in our party.
“Sir, that man is a resident of Manaloch, he only guided their group here,” explained the receptionist, and Garnet turned to face Kevin.
“Ah, I see. Thank you for guiding Pomera here…” Then his eyebrows came together in a scowl. “But as a resident of this city, you would know that almost all applications from outsiders are rejected. Would you care to explain to me why, while knowing this fact, you still guided them here?”
“O-oh, well…I-I just…” Kevin’s face paled and sweat ran down his forehead.
Garnet looked quickly between Pomera, the receptionist, and me. That seemed enough for him to guess what had happened. His brow furrowed further as he glared at Kevin.
“It’s people like you that give the people of Manaloch a reputation for being arrogant and mean-spirited! Absolutely shameful. How do you intend to make up for the grief you’ve put Miss Pomera through?” said Garnet.
“U-uh, well… I’ll…” Sweat was practically pooling at Kevin’s feet.
“Oh, just begone! But I’ll remember your face. I won’t tell you to leave Manaloch, but I’d better not catch you hanging around the Mithril Wand again.”

“Y-yes, sir!” Kevin ran away on hurried feet.
Garnet watched him leave, exasperated, but his original smile was back in place by the time he turned to face Pomera again. “Well, that’s cleared up. Allow me to show you around.”
For such a kind man, he certainly had a short fuse.

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WE FOLLOWED GARNET into the Mithril Wand with our newly issued passes in hand. Plush carpets lined the floor and elegant paintings hung on the walls. Rows of display cases held magic items that looked like works of art. The people here were unlike anyone in the stores we had visited before. They seemed to be a reserved, scholarly bunch and they bowed their heads to Garnet as they passed. Still, they didn’t pay much attention to me, Pomera, or Philia.
“Philia’s a good girl,” she said. She seemed to have made it a personal mission to be on her best behavior while we were inside the Mithril Wand. Perhaps she had been shocked by the receptionist’s refusal to let her enter.
“You *are* a good girl, and thank you. It helps me out a lot.” I patted her head gently and she smiled contentedly. “Sorry, I didn’t realize how strict this place was.”
I was sure she could have waited outside if it came down to it. Well, mostly sure. …A little sure. I was just relieved we wouldn’t have to find out. I could do without a surprise First Dragon in the sky when we got done with our tour.
Pomera wouldn’t have recognized adamantine ore on her own, even if I lent her the Acacia Memoirs. She also wouldn’t know how to check for other ores that might work as substitutes if adamant was unavailable. Garnet wasn’t going to give a tour to me without Pomera either. It was good we were all still a happy group that didn’t have to split up.
While I was dividing my attention between Philia and the magic items in the cases, Garnet was busy bending Pomera’s ear with all sorts of conversation. She was doing her best to answer, but she was still glancing over at me in hope of rescue. I tried inserting myself into their chat a few times, but to no avail. Garnet wanted to talk to her, not me. Eventually I gave up, unwilling to annoy our new patron.
I went back to looking at the items on display. Each case had a plaque describing the item inside. The quality of the items here was worlds away from what I’d seen in the shops; this was the real deal. I was sure to find adamant here.
But there was one critical problem that needed to be addressed.
“Excuse me, Garnet-san,” I said as I risked barging into their conversation again. “The reason we visited today was to see if you had an item we were looking for. Unfortunately, we don’t have a lot of money at the moment. I

wouldn’t want to waste your time when we might not be able to purchase anything…”
If D-rank items could cost 340,000 gold, An S-rank item like adamantine ore might well be completely out of our price range. We needed it badly, but our current budget just couldn’t support it.
“Is that so? Well, for Saint Pomera, I’m willing to extend a line of credit. I would like to form a long-lasting relationship with you, after all.” Garnet smiled warmly as he spoke. It was a tempting offer, but I worried about being in debt to such a powerful person.
“Well then, what are you looking for, Miss Pomera?” asked Garnet.
“U-uh, an ore. Right, Kanata?” Pomera looked back at me for confirmation. I nodded in confirmation.
Garnet watched us appraisingly, trying to gauge our relationship. When she turned back to Garnet, he smiled again like nothing was amiss.
“An ore, eh? Leave it to me. You won’t be disappointed with our collection,” said Garnet proudly. “It rivals even the selection at the Royal Institute of Alchemy.”
We followed Garnet up a set of stairs and into a room on the third floor. Garnet explained, “Now, in general, only members of the Mithril Wand or those who have had a pass for more than ten years are allowed in here, but…my authority allows me to bend the rules a bit.”
Glass display cases were arrayed around the large room, each one containing an arrangement of various minerals. It was truly impressive to see such an exhaustive collection on display.
“Wow, so pretty!” said Philia in admiration, but then realized she’d let that slip and clamped her hands over her mouth.
“Yes, they are, aren’t they?” said Garnet, lowering his head a little to look Philia directly in the face. “We take great care in arranging them. If there’s something you particularly like, I could give you a necklace made with it—as a little present.”
“Really?!” Philia’s eyes sparkled with excitement.
I felt the blood draining from my face. I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that the ores here were close to a million gold each. Just because it was a gift didn’t mean there wouldn’t be a price to be paid down the road.
“Ph-Philia-chan, I don’t want to be rude to Garnet-san, but I think it’s best if you don’t take anything,” I said.
“Oh… Well, if you say so.”
“If I get enough money, I’ll buy you something instead.”
“A present from Kanata?! Yay! Philia will wait!” She flapped her arms about and squirmed, then realized she was being loud again and pressed her hands over her mouth.
“Ho ho, you don’t have to worry about making a little noise,” said Garnet. “There’s no one else but us in the room right now.”
Garnet led us around the room, and I looked at all the ingots and ores on display.

“This one is Manaloch steel. The Mithril Wand produces this using our proprietary alchemical process. What do you think? Isn’t the slightly reddish-silver color beautiful?” Garnet indicated a striking rectangle of polished metal, almost twenty inches long. If it were worked, it would probably be just about enough to make one sword. “Manaloch steel is a high-performance metal that can still be easily forged into useful objects. It’s an alloy of a number of rare metals. Even at the Mithril Wand, there are so few people capable of making Manaloch Steel that I could count them on one hand.”

It sounded like this metal was the culmination of the Mithril Wand’s research. The value of the base metals was multiplied by the expertise and skill of the alchemists that labored to create the final product. It was almost certainly not cheap.

“M-might I ask, about how much does it cost?” said Pomera hesitantly.

“Ah, yes. Generally, an ingot of this size would be sold for 1.5 million gold.”

“Wow, 1.5 million…” I repeated before I could stop myself. Even though I had mentally prepared myself for this possibility, I hadn’t thought prices would so quickly exceed one million. The difference in price between high- and low-ranked items was as extreme as the difference in level between high- and low-ranked adventurers.

We couldn’t get that kind of money if we spent our time casually completing low-rank requests at the Guild. As it turned out, S-rank items were absurdly expensive. I should have known.

It was time to change our income strategy. We would probably be more efficient in terms of money making if we completely ignored Guild requests and focused on hunting high-value monsters. Maybe it was time to head back to Cocytus.

If we stuck to dispatching level 100 monsters, then we’d come off as about as strong as an A-rank adventurer. We could make decent cash and not attract any unwanted attention.

Besides, there was probably variation in value between S-rank items as well. Since there was no labor involved in making adamantine ore, it was possible that it was cheaper. Hopefully, we were looking at something more in the realm of eight hundred thousand gold.

“Anyway, who cares about Manaloch steel,” said Garnet. “I’m embarrassed by how much I’ve been prattling on. The majority of our ores and metals are on display here. Just tell me what you’re looking for. I know this place like the back of my hand.”

I looked around the room, a bit lost, since I didn’t recognize any of the ores or metals.

“Where do you keep the adamantine ore?” I asked.

“I’m sorry? I must have misheard you. Could you say that again?” Garnet looked at me with an expression of pity.

“We’re looking for adamantine ore…” I said and Garnet’s smile stiffened. Something was off.

I glanced at Pomera and saw her facepalming in embarrassment. She'd seen this coming.
"I-I'm sorry!" I thought fast, trying to backpedal. "I must have mixed some names up in my head and said something really strange!"
I pulled the Acacia Memoirs from my magic bag and thought about the Manaloch Steel as I flipped through the pages.

MANALOCH STEEL
Value Rank: C
An alloy developed in the city of Manaloch. Its red-tinted silver sheen is quite beautiful.
This alloy is used to make weapons in Manaloch and other nearby cities. It is favored by B-rank adventurers who have money to spare, as well as A-rank adventurers who are unable to find a more suitable weapon.
Production can't currently keep up with the alloy's popularity, but the Mithril Wand keeps the price stable out of goodwill.

C-rank?!
I felt the blood drain from my face and an uncomfortable sweat clung to my skin.
I had been sure that S-rank items weren't all that big a deal, considering they were the third from the top after Godly and Legendary. Heck, I'd literally tripped over S-rank items on the lower floors of Cocytus.
Now I knew for sure that I wouldn't be able to find adamant in a shop. And if a C-rank item was 1.5 million gold, how much would an S-rank be? Ten Million? Twenty?!
Even if I collected every S-rank item I found before I came here and sold them for the cash, it wouldn't do me any good. All I'd be able to buy would be a bunch of lousy C-rank items.
How many of those Blood Ethers of the Gods did Lunaère give me to guzzle?! My mind was racing, and I felt sick. My basic sense of how much money was worth had begun to crumble before my eyes.
"Pomera, your companion looks unwell…" murmured Garnet.
"U-uh, may I ask something? Out of curiosity, what's the highest rank of item this facility provides?" said Pomera.
"The highest available to the public is C-rank. B-rank items are for research purposes only. Why do you ask?"
I cradled my head in my hands. This was devastating.
Garnet's kind, worried expression stabbed at my heart.

AFTER THAT TERRIBLE REVELATION, the tour around the Mithril Wand continued. I was mortified, and having Garnet peer over at me with a concerned look every now and then didn't help. There was no way I was going to find adamantine or a suitable substitute anywhere in Manaloch.
I somehow managed to survive the near fatal embarrassment, and a few hours later, we walked out the front door.
Mentally and emotionally, I was spent. Pomera and Philia seemed drained as well, so we retired to a tavern.
"So thirsty…" murmured Pomera with a tiny smile. I felt myself tense.
"I don't actually like alcohol that much. And you…well I'd prefer if you didn't get drunk. We should just have food and stick to water." I gave the white mage a stern look.
"W-was I really that horrible?" asked Pomera uneasily.
I forced a smile and made noncommittal gestures with my hands.
"I don't think you could give a vaguer reply…"
"It's just best if you don't ask."
"S-so I really *was* that horrible," she said, hanging her head. "I'm sorry for whatever trouble I caused you."
In my mind, I saw an image of Pomera, cheerfully slurring my name as she stroked my cheek. Funny in retrospect, but I would prefer to not deal with that again.
"Uh… Anyway, are you giving up on finding that ore?" she asked, trying to change the subject.
I nodded glumly. "Yeah. It seems that we can't buy anything higher than C-rank in the city. We'll have to either make some connections or find a way to get the ingredients ourselves."
I leaned my head on my fist. I should have been more careful about how we used the Blood Ethers of the Gods. Now they were gone forever. I really needed to stop relying on the standards that I'd grown used to in Cocytus.
"I'm sorry, I should have tried to explain it to you better," said Pomera, looking into the distance. "You were just so full of confidence. I started thinking I was the one who was mistaken…"
"I don't know what we'll do though, since we can't get adamantine ore," I said. "I wanted to raise your level a little bit more, but it looks like we've got to put that on hold."
"Oh, I think my level is probably high enough anyway…" said Pomera with a tiny hint of a smile.
"Kanata wants something?" asked Philia, sitting next to me in the tavern.
"Yeah, I wanted a rare ore. But it's about three ranks rarer than I thought. Looks like I'm just out of luck."
Philia gulped down the food she'd just put in her mouth, then thumped her chest confidently. "Philia will make it for you! What's its name, Kanata? What's it look like?"
"You'll make it for me…?" Well, this was confusing.

“Tell me!”
“It’s called adamantine ore. It’s a very hard, purple stone…”
“Leave it to Philia!”
She squeezed her hand and let out a small grunt of concentration. When she opened her fingers, she was holding a shining purple stone. It certainly looked like adamant!
“Wh-what?!” I shouted in shock, forgetting we were in the restaurant.
“Philia’s amazing, right? Philia’s amazing!” While Philia was shouting proudly, Pomera just sat there looking at her, dumbfounded.
“Hey! Keep it down over there,” warned one of the tavern workers. I’d gotten a little carried away and forgotten where we were.
“Sorry,” I apologized, but I was still boggling at the purplish lump of metal.
“K-Kanata, how exactly did she do that?” asked Pomera.
“Well, Philia’s body is just one big mass of the Sand of Dreams,” I said. “It’s the ultimate alchemical catalyst, and I guess she can make anything she wants. Dragons, adamantine ore…”
It was just too convenient. But the ore was still part of Philia’s body, wasn’t it? Could I really use it in that case? I picked at my dinner, but questions about the Sand of Dreams swam through my head.
After finishing our meal, we went back to my room and I started to examine the ore. Placing the fragment inside a cauldron, I ran a series of tests to determine just what it was Philia had handed me.
“How is it? How is it? Was Philia useful?” Philia asked in excitement.
“Sorry, Philia. It’s not going to work,” I replied with an apologetic smile.
“N-not going to work…?” The shock nearly caused Philia to collapse, but Pomera rushed over to support her.
“But I thought you said that Philia had the power to create all sorts of things,” said Pomera.
“It looks like the real thing, but on a fundamental level, it’s still the Sand of Dreams. Once I break it down below a certain size, it crumbles and merges back with Philia-chan’s body,” I explained.
To top it off, the Acacia Memoirs confirmed that anything she made was still the Sand of Dreams. It looked like her faux ore would be a bust when it came to acting as an alchemical substitute. I had to admit that I was a little relieved, though. The thought of slowly using up Philia-chan’s body to make potions skeeved me out.
That gave me an idea. What if I could use the Sand of Dreams, but not destroy it during the reaction?
“I do think I might be able to make some adamantine ore using the Sand of Dreams as a catalyst,” I said.
“Really? Philia can still be useful?!” Philia recovered from her shock and beamed cheerily.
I hadn’t proven this yet, but I theorized that I could use the Sand of Dreams to start a chain reaction, causing a lower-ranked ore to *become* adamant. The best part was that it wouldn’t destroy any of the Sand in the process. At

its core, the Sand of Dreams had the ability to change a wide range of characteristics in various materials as long as you used it correctly.
Even if I couldn't make adamantine ore, I might be able to make a something with similar properties that I could use as an ingredient in the Blood Ethers. I was starting to see a path forward.
Now we just needed lots of money.

—12—

WHILE KANATA floundered in his search for alchemical ingredients, a lone figure clothed in an ominous black robe visited an abandoned church in Manaloch.
The intimidating garment belied the delicate face peering out from beneath the hood. Her doll-like features and porcelain skin were at odds with her fashion choices, no matter how necessary they might be.
Lunaère seemed unsteady and leaned against the church wall. After resting for a moment, she composed herself and removed her hood.
Sticking her arm out into the empty air, she cast a spell. "Space-time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket."
A magic circle appeared in the air, and a gold- and jewel-trimmed treasure chest tumbled from the center. It did a flip as it descended and landed neatly, right side up.
"How'd it go, Lunaère? Did ya find Kanata?" Noble asked, checking to make sure he was still in one piece.
Tears spilled from her expressionless eyes. "…Let's go back to Cocytus, Noble."
"Already?!" Noble jumped in shock, but his reaction only yielded a small nod from her. "B-but Lunaère, you worked so hard to make that robe…"
The robe held back the aura of unholy impurity that surrounded all liches. However, it apparently hadn't been enough to cloak her from Kanata's companions—both Philia and Pomera had noticed her before she could make contact. Admittedly, the robe wasn't a total failure. Without it, the entire city would have descended into riots due to her aura's influence.
Still, it had been a rush job. Lunaère had utilized her every last scrap of knowledge and hunted throughout Cocytus for monsters to provide the materials she needed to make the robe on short notice. It could still use some finishing touches.
"I've had enough…" she said with a sniffle. "I'm not a living person like Kanata. I should never have left the dungeon. Even with this on, I still cause chaos."
"But you've seemed so happy since we left the dungeon…" Noble tried to console her.
That was half-true. Lunaère had been in high spirits the day they exited Cocytus, but since then, she'd been showing signs of anxiety and doubt.

Noble had listened to her ramble on as they traveled, giving the occasional encouraging response where he could. But in the end, she kept swinging between hope and fear, saying things like, “Will I get to see Kanata today? Maybe I’ll see him tomorrow. How do I explain everything to him when I do meet him again?”

Lunaère had been ecstatic when she heard he was coming to Manaloch, the City of Magic. She was certain she would meet him here, but here they were instead, in a vacant church.

“My heart is supposed to be dead, yet for some reason, it hurts. I don’t think there’s any hope for me.” Lunaère was clearly losing her nerve. She clutched a hand to her chest as if it hurt, then sank to the ground and hugged her knees.

“Okay. What happened?” asked Noble with a heavy sigh.

Lunaère was silent for a moment. “There was a girl with Kanata. And she was pretty. And she had blonde hair. They seemed to really get along.”

“And?”

“What do you mean *and*?!”

“There’s a girl he gets along with. So what?”

Lunaère was silent again.

“Lemme see if I’ve got this straight. You took one look at him and this girl. They didn’t seem to hate each other, so you ran away?” Noble wrinkled his lid in irritation. He’d been Lunaère’s friend for many years, but he’d never thought she was this naïve—even for an undead hermit that lived at the bottom of a dungeon.

“That’s not it! I-I thought about observing them more, but there was a little girl. No—a homunculus—who’s really sensitive to the unholy impurity. She attacked me. I was surprised, so I ran away…”

“She attacked even though you had your robe?” Noble knew that the robe wasn’t perfect, but he was dubious that it was ineffective enough to elicit a random attack while Lunaère was innocently walking down the street. “Are you sure you weren’t staring at that blonde girl with, eh…hostile intentions?”

Lunaère’s shoulders shook, and she buried her face in her knees.

Noble let out a heavy sigh. “…Lunaère?”

“I-I didn’t have hostile intentions. Not many.”

“…Not many?”

“I-I was just observing. I was curious about her relationship with Kanata. I swear,” she waved her hands, trying to deflect his suspicion.

“Look…we came this far. How about you try *talking* to Kanata? No more jumping to conclusions.”

“I can’t do that. I almost let Kanata see me, and…I think he guessed it was me and came running. But how can I face him after the way I made him leave Cocytus? I’ve made such a mess.”

“Then how ’bout you give up on Kanata and we go back to Cocytus?”

“I don’t want to do that…”

“Then we’re right back to having to talk to him.”
Lunaère lifted her head in surprise. Noble was right. If giving up wasn’t an option, then she had no other choice but to talk to Kanata. Putting it off wouldn’t accomplish anything. The situation would just get worse.
“Going full-on stalker then, huh?” muttered Noble, but Lunaère didn’t seem to hear.
She cast Dimension Pocket and withdrew the materials she needed to strengthen the robe. Noble looked on pensively. “Maybe we *should* go back, before things go south…”

Chapter 2:
The Ragni Hunting Feud

—1—

AFTER TAKING A DAY off to rest, we went down to the Adventurers' Guild in Manaloch.

Though we could probably have used another few days of relaxation, we needed to start making money. If I used Philia's Sand of Dreams as a catalyst, I thought I might be able to make adamantine ore from a lower-grade material. But as we had learned on our first day in Manaloch, even those base ingredients were prohibitively expensive.

With the three of us working together, any job that the Guild offered would be a breeze. We'd have to work harder to keep our true power under wraps than we would to complete the actual mission. At least one high-level magic user was lurking around town, so the lower we kept our profile, the better.

The Adventurers' Guild in Manaloch was way fancier than the one in Arroburg. The floor was polished marble, so reflective that we could see ourselves as we walked along the corridor. The type of people in the Guild were different too; I barely saw anyone who looked like a thug. It was probably because we were in Manaloch and there were quite a lot of magic users.

"We're C-rank right now, we should be able to find something with decent pay," I said while checking the adventurer registration card I'd received in Arroburg.

"It seems a waste of time accepting C-rank requests considering your actual strength," muttered Pomera.

No argument from me, but guild rules were guild rules and C-rank jobs were easy money.

"Can Philia be an adventurer too?" said Philia, her eyes sparkling. She seemed to admire the adventurers walking through the hall. Then again, she seemed to be enthusiastic about everything.

"Sure. I'll pay the registration fee and have them make you a registration card," I said, patting her head.

She jumped up and down, tugging on my robe. "Yay! Thank you, Kanata! Philia's so happy!"

The lady behind the reception counter seemed far less enthusiastic about the idea. She gave me a look of distinct disapproval.

"You want to register a little girl as an adventurer? What is she, ten years old?"

"Oh, does that break some sort of rule?" I asked.

"No… But it's something that most reputable people wouldn't even try in the first place. We get people coming in from time to time wanting to

register children…but seriously, who does that?” The receptionist looked disgusted.
The registration system seemed to have a number of loopholes. For example, only C-rank adventurers could accept a C-rank request—but a C-rank adventurer might accept the request, then try to subcontract it out to a D-rank adventurer. I’d also heard of people buying monster parts from another adventurer who’d already completed a job. Then the buyer would turn them in and claim the credit. In practice, exploiting those loopholes was only punished when the guild was presented with undeniable evidence of wrongdoing.
That meant the guild workers had their hands full trying to keep things on the level. If they thought something seemed suspicious and decided to put a stop to it proactively, that was well within their rights.
“But Philia’s not a child! Philia’s five thousand years old!” said Philia, stamping her foot on the ground and chipping the marble surface a little.
“Philia, calm down! Please? Okay?” said Pomera. She had an idea what a full-blown tantrum might entail.
“Do you intend to take that kid on monster hunts with you?” The receptionist gave Philia an appraising stare, then turned her skeptical gaze back to me.
“Philia is a really strong child. Honest,” I said lamely. I was beginning to realize how bad this looked.
“I suppose there was the legendary hero, Rosa. They said she defeated a dragon at the age of ten. This kid doesn’t look like a legendary hero, though.”
Philia had been hanging her head in dejection, but she looked up, her face set to answer the challenge. I immediately put out an arm to hold her back.
“Philia-chan, no First Dragon!” I warned.
She looked at me for a moment, then smiled as she reached some internal compromise.
“Gravity—” she said, pointing her finger.
“No Gravity Bomb either!”
It was the perfect spell to show her true strength, but we couldn’t afford to lose our only source of income just because she wanted to make a point.
“K-Kanata, do you think you could do something…?” Pomera asked in terror, her face ashen.
What could I do? It was time to wing it and hope for the best.
“This girl, Philia-chan, is actually a fighter,” I started rambling. “But that doesn’t mean I’m planning on taking her into fights all the time. She *is* a prodigy, but she’s still young. But I told her she could register as an adventurer today, since she has the minimum strength necessary, and it’s sort of an important anniversary for her. She’s got a whole tragic backstory that I’m sure you don’t care about, but I would be happy to go into it, if you’d like to hear more. Otherwise, it would mean a whole lot to everyone

here if you could find it in your heart to register her as a sort of charity case. As long as it doesn't break the rules, of course…"
While I was talking, I slid the gold for her registration across the counter, along with a generous handful of coins as a…*tip.*
After counting the coins and a moment of silence, the receptionist smiled. The smile didn't reach her eyes. "Well, if you put it like that, I suppose there's nothing against the rules here. I just wanted to make sure you were certain."
The receptionist quickly gathered up the gold coins and lightly clenched her fist in a gesture of victory.
Our problem was solved, but I now knew that the Guild wasn't above simple bribery. Not a reassuring discovery, but I wasn't in a place to argue.
A few minutes later, Philia had a registration card and a new copy of the orientation manual.
"Yaaay! Now Philia's an adventurer too!" said Philia, striking a victory pose with her registration card. I let out a sigh of relief. At least the Guild hadn't been destroyed by a First Dragon.
"Okay. Now that that's out of the way, we would like to accept a request. Are there any good requests for C-rank adventurers?" I asked the receptionist.
"At the moment, the best paying request is open to all ranks," she said. "We are asking everyone to prioritize this one. A monster stampede is ongoing in a forest near the city. Tons of black spiders. Just loads of them."
"Black spiders?" That seemed familiar.
"The Adventurers' Guild is asking all adventurers to prioritize neutralizing this monster stampede. These black spiders are of a species called ragno, and they're creepy as heck. They have one large eye; collect that as proof of a kill. Compensation for each ragno eye is set at twenty-five thousand gold," she continued.
They sounded like the same black spiders we'd fought while protecting the caravan.
But twenty-five thousand apiece? I suddenly wished I had gathered eyes from the ones that attacked us on the road. There had been close to fifty of them—that would have fallen just short of 1.5 million.
Dang.
Looked like the Guild was willing to open up their pocketbook for this one.
"The ragni are estimated to be around D-rank difficulty. We strongly recommend that any adventures below D-rank approach this request with great caution," the receptionist rattled off. Apparently, that was the boilerplate cautionary disclaimer that all adventurers got.
But it made sense. When I'd used Status Check on a ragno during the defense of the caravan, I saw that it was level 24. That fell in line with what a D-rank adventurer ought to be able to handle in a one-on-one fight.
"One other thing, this case is *highly* anomalous." The receptionist looked slightly apologetic. "We don't often ascertain the cause of monster

stampedes—and thus far, that is the case here as well—but the scale of this incursion is much larger than normal. There may be a high-ranking monster using the spiders as cover for whatever scheme it has planned. Even so, if we leave the ragni to their own icky devices, there are concerns that they will soon start invading the city. With that threat in mind, the Guild has decided to devote its resources to killing the ragni in lieu of further investigations. Any information you come across that would help explain this event will make you eligible for a bonus."

A bonus would be nice—but if the Guild had limited resources, it meant that once we were in the field, we were on our own. I was sure we'd be fine, but I appreciated the advice to remain on guard.

The receptionist handed me a pamphlet that had an overview of the information on the request. There was a map of the area around the city, with spider icons stamped on areas where ragni had been sighted.

The area around the caravan attack had a red spider icon on it, which seemed to mean that *a lot* of ragni sightings had taken place there. A note recommended that only adventurers of B-rank or higher should visit those sites.

"What do you think, Pomera? It's ideal from a money perspective, and it could help a lot of people." I finished reading the pamphlet and handed it over to her.

"I think it's good," she said after she studied it for a few moments. "There doesn't seem to be any other option, anyway."

With my partner's approval, I turned back to the receptionist. "Okay, we would like to accept the request for eradicating ragni."

"Looks like a lot of other adventurers are planning to hunt ragni as well," said Pomera after we accepted the request and moved away from reception. I followed her gaze across the room and noticed a pair of adventurers talking about the request.

"Ragni are pretty rare, but they're nothing to be afraid of. Twenty-five thousand gold apiece is a good deal too."

"Yeah, I'm glad this city has the money it does. It's not that hard to make a whole month's income in one blast. Just hit 'em with a spell with a wide area of effect."

It looked like we'd have competition.

The Guild just wanted the threat taken care of as soon as possible, but I worried this setup might lead to some contentious encounters on our hunting trip. If that was the case, then we needed to get moving—the money was just too good. A repeat of the caravan incident could net us an easy million for a few minutes work.

Another familiar face was making an appearance at a reception desk.

"We are relieved that one of the few A-rank adventurers has stepped up and accepted the request," said the other receptionist.

"Hmph, it's disappointing that there aren't many who can keep up with me here in the City of Magic. Perhaps I've simply grown too strong," Alfred

seemed just as pompous as before. By his side was the same swordswoman with short blue hair.
“One of the few A-rank adventurers…?” I muttered. Alfred’s level was only 76. Sure, he would probably be fine against the ragni, but level 76 was just embarrassing.
I’d already confirmed that most people were low level compared to me, but…ugh. I just wished that people would stop giving me a reason to think that Lovis had been something special.
“Good luck! I’m not sure this is something an employee of the Guild should say, but I’ve been a fan of yours for years! When I heard you were coming to Manaloch…I-I hoped we’d be able to meet!” said the receptionist while blushing.
“I hear that all the time…but I don’t consider anything I’ve done to be amazing. It’s just that I’ve got such poor competition, it’s hard not to look good,” said Alfred with an exaggerated shrug. Some of the adventurers nearby glared at him angrily.
If I’d learned anything from walking around Manaloch, it was that the residents were prideful to the point of arrogance. Alfred had just painted a great big target on his back.
“If you’re not sure that was something an employee of the Guild should say, then maybe you should just shut your mouth and do your job. Ever hear of professionalism?” said the swordswoman, clinging to Alfred’s arm. The two ladies glared daggers at one another.
“Calm yourself, Sera,” said Alfred. “The frightened people of this city crave a hero to save them from the monsters. Since the local cowards have failed, it’s my duty to fulfill their request—even if it may seem trivial to an adventurer of my caliber.”
Alfred ran his fingers through his hair, his every motion calculated to bolster his persona. His eyes looked distant, then he let out a faraway sigh. It was like he rehearsed these moves in front of a mirror.
“Tell your employer to get the money ready, Guild girl. I will gather more eyes from the ragnos than any other adventurer,” declared Alfred loudly.
“So…he’s one of the cool kids,” I muttered. *And it’s* ragni *not* ragnos.
“Are you serious, Kanata?!” asked Pomera with a disgusted expression.
It was obvious that everything Alfred said and did was an act, but as I observed him, I started to understand why he was doing it. Sure, he was full of himself and putting on a front, but he had the strength to back up his arrogance. Well, at least in a relative sense—he was only level 76, after all. But from the Guild’s perspective, he was a major player.
“K-Kanata, you admire that…buffoon?” asked Pomera as she regarded me with narrowed eyes.
“Well, I wouldn’t say I admire him…” I said, stumbling over my words.
Pomera stiffened in shock, but then she seemed to make up her mind and clenched her fists. “N-no matter what, I will stay with you!”
I guess Pomera didn’t think Alfred was very cool.

—2—

AFTER ACCEPTING the ragni request, we did the bare minimum of preparation. We bought some food and started walking to a nearby forest that was marked with a red symbol on the map. With luck, we'd be entering a target-rich environment.

"It's a bit strange… I've never heard of a monster stampede that covers such a large area," said Pomera as looked at the map while we walked.

"Is it a sign that something bad will happen?" I asked.

"Possibly. There's no good way to know, but it's really unusual."

"We'll be there soon, Kanata. I can sense the ragni nearby," said Pomera. Now that she knew what to look for, her attunement to the spirit realm made her sensitive to the presence of beasts of all sorts.

I closed my eyes and focused my attention. Pomera was right; I could feel the same presence I'd detected when we were guarding the wagons. The ragni seemed to be underground…but I could also sense someone else approaching us.

A figure in a black coat appeared at the top of a nearby tree. Beneath the coat, they wore metal armor and their face was covered by a simple mask made to look like a goat. A sturdy metal staff shaped like a cross was strapped to their back. It was nearly as thick as my wrist, which was rare to see in a magic user's staff. An orange braid of hair fell from one side of their goat mask.

"A-a woman…?" said Pomera timidly as she cautiously brandished her lighter staff at the tree.

Goat-mask person leapt from the tree and landed on the ground several paces ahead of us. Their armor was apparently quite heavy, because a spray of dirt kicked up as they touched down.

"You gotta be more careful, guys. Don't you know this is a dangerous area?" Their voice was muffled behind the mask.

"Besides, these are my hunting grounds," the masked person continued, without giving us an opportunity to respond. "I'd hate for you to get in the way and get hurt. So take the hint and pound sand. I'd rather not have to force the issue."

"Who are you…?" I asked.

Adventurers that operated alone were rare. The staff marked them as a magic user, but magic users almost never wore armor that heavy. Even melee fighters tended to go for mobility over armor.

"I'm Rosemonde. Adventurer. A-rank type. If you don't know me, pal, then you must not be from Manaloch. I don't really care who you are, because you're about to turn around and walk away."

An A-rank adventurer, eh? That meant they were in the same league as Alfred. Knowing that, their extreme armor started to look like a cute gimmick to me.
“I appreciate your concern for our safety, but we know the danger. No need to worry about us,” I said.
“Are you seriously going to make me spell it out for you? You. Are. In. My. Way. For the last time: Leave. I don’t like other adventurers stealing my kills, and I can’t concentrate on fighting with kids like you scampering around.”
Rosemonde stretched their gauntlet-clad arm toward us, then clenched their fist. The joints in the armor slid together, letting out a metallic clang.
“I’d rather not fight when there’s no cash involved, but maybe a demonstration is in order.” Rosemonde took the massive staff in their hand. “If you keep hanging around, I’m gonna make you understand why they call me Annihilation Rosemonde. The choice is yours.”
I tensed as Rosemonde spoke. It didn’t look like they were willing to back down. The unnecessary threats were annoying, but a fight could lead to trouble even if we won. This was their home turf, after all.
Plenty of ragni in other places.
“All right, we’ll leave—” I started, but Philia swaggered forward with a big smile. She pointed her arm at Rosemonde. “Philia-chan, stop! Come back!” If she tossed out another First Dragon, it would be a bloodbath.
“Philia can handle this man! Philia wants to be useful to Kanata,” she said sadly and hung her head.
“Man?! Is that brat seriously making fun of me?” said Rosemonde. They seemed angrier and took a step toward us.
“I-I’m sorry, we’re going,” I said with a bow.
“That person looks like a sorcerer-type magic user, Kanata,” said Pomera in a quiet voice.
“What makes you think that?” I asked.
I’d heard of sorcerers. They were magic users who specialized in area of effect attacks. Since I had used those spells to power level in the Mirror, I supposed that made me a sorcerer too.
But there wasn’t anything about Rosemonde that screamed *sorcerer* to me. The nickname “Annihilation Rosemonde” *did* sound like the sort of name a sorcerer would have, but I couldn’t guess their fighting style based on that alone.
“Well…you don’t really see head-to-toe armor on anyone but a sorcerer—not that I’ve ever seen one firsthand. And that mask looks more like it’s meant to protect against blasts, not swords and claws. I think the heavy armor might protect them from the backblast of their own spells.”
“Hah, that girl knows her stuff! But it’s kind of pathetic that you’ve never seen a real sorcerer before,” said Rosemonde with a snort of laughter.

“Who intentionally gets caught in the backblast of their spells?” I asked, bewildered. “That just sounds like poor planning and control. It’s easier to fight if you don’t overextend yourself and use magic within your limits…”
Lunaère had taught me all sorts of strategies for fighting other magic users, but she’d never once mentioned an absurd fighting style where you covered yourself in armor and blasted away with area of effect spells.
Besides, a robe capable of protecting against your particular school of magic should be plenty to guard you against any accidental backblast.
“K-Kanata, look…” said Pomera.
I’d thought I was speaking quietly enough that only Pomera could hear. Unfortunately, Rosemonde had been listening in, and she took my comment personally.
“That’s not what I meant! I’m sorry, I don’t know anything,” I said, bowing my head, but I was already too late.
“Oh no, you don’t get to run your mouth then slide out with a lame apology! Time to teach you some manners!”
Rosemonde stuck their cross-shaped staff into the ground and struck a fighting stance.
“Philia will take care of this!” said Philia, her face full of excitement, but I grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back.
“P-please just stay right there!” I said.
“You’ll be singing a different tune after today! Earth Magic Level 3: Earth Needle!”
A magic circle appeared, then Rosemonde swiped their staff sideways as if erasing the circle. A twenty-inch-long needle sprouted from the ground and launched in my direction. I stepped forward and lifted my hand in front of me.
“You donkey! You can’t stop Earth Needle with your bare hand!”
Before the needle struck me, it crumbled, the fragments scattering to the ground.
“Aw, jeez… You got an item that does that or something, kid?” Rosemonde let out a low groan.
Lunaère’s Robe deflected all low-level spells. That attack had never posed a threat to me.
“I apologize for what I said. It was very rude, and I don’t want to fight you. If you would please lower your weapon, we’ll just go.”
“Let me think about that… Nah. You insult me, eliminate my spell, then have the nerve to tell me to lower my weapon?! Sounds like a challenge to me, buddy. I have my status as an A-rank adventurer to protect!” shouted Rosemonde. “No more holding back! Time to raise some hell!”
Canceling out Rosemonde’s spell was a bad move, then? Should I use force to make them leave?
That would probably be a bad idea too. They were apparently well-known in Manaloch. I preferred to not make an enemy before we’d made any friends.
“Earth Magic Level 4: Clod Missile!”

A clump of earth launched from in front of Rosemonde in my direction. Just as it reached me, it was repelled by the robe, changing its trajectory so it struck the ground instead.
“I’ve got you now, sucker! That spell explodes!” cheered Rosemonde.
The clod hissed for a few seconds, then detonated. As the dirt cleared, I stood there unharmed.
What do I do? Is there a way to resolve this situation without it becoming a problem down the road?
“Okay. Okay. You’re not too bad! Fine. Let me show you what a sorcerer is really about! Earth Magic Level 5: Clod Bomb!”
A glowing red sphere appeared in front of Rosemonde. The dirt below peeled away from the ground and gathered around the light until it became a perfectly round lump of earth about the size of a basketball.
I might be immune to damage, but I should put some space between me and the girls.
“Fall back, you two,” I shouted, and Pomera jogged away with Philia in tow.
“Looks like you’re finally ready to fight! Come on, kid—get a little closer and let’s dance!” said Rosemonde.
“No. Look, I don’t want to—”
“This time I’ll blow you away with a direct hit! Avoid this!”
Rosemonde swung their staff and the sphere of dirt launched at me.
I reached out my arms and stopped the ball. Cracks appeared on the surface, red light leaking out for a moment before it exploded. The ground around me was blown away, leaving most of the grass torn up while only a small clump directly under my feet remained.
“…I-Is this some sort of prank?” said Rosemonde, flabbergasted and frozen in place as they lowered their staff.
Even Notts’s spells had all been below tenth level. Lunaère’s Robe had neutralized all of those, so I could probably assume that any spell an A-rank adventurer could toss at me was going to be completely useless. To put it bluntly, this fight was pointless. Rosemonde had no way of hurting me with magic. They had a better chance of just whacking me with that giant staff.
“Please just lower your weapon. I’d rather not counterattack,” I said.
“Ha ha ha…” Rosemonde readied their staff again with a dire chuckle. A magic circle appeared, centered on the tip of their staff. Another red sphere of light appeared.
“I’m surprised there’s a magic user who can back me into a corner like this. I’ll give you that, and I apologize for underestimating you. From here on out, my pride and my life are on the line!”
“What do you mean I’ve backed you into a corner?! We’re outside! There are no corners!” I shouted.
“I’ll show you my most powerful spell! Earth Magic Level 7: Ground Bomb!”
The earth peeled away in strips once more, and within moments a floating mass of dirt almost three feet in diameter hovered between us.

Rosemonde swung their staff down. The mass raced toward me an instant before red light exploded around us. The surface of the ground warped wherever the light touched it. Nearby trees folded over, blackened and burnt.

Once the blast ended, I could see Rosemonde kneeling ahead of me, their breathing heavy, their arm braced on the ground to hold them up. Parts of their coat and armor had been torn away in the blast. Half of the goat mask covering their face had broken off.

Underneath the armor and coat, Rosemonde's body was surprisingly slender, and the face I could see was definitely that of a woman. The red makeup around her large tiger-like eyes was striking. She was beautiful, but her expression was like that of a wild beast.
Pomera had been right.
Her breathing was ragged from the pain of being caught in Ground Bomb's blast. There was no way I could have dodged even if I'd wanted to, but I hadn't really had to try. The robe simply neutralized any damage and I was unharmed.
"Wh-why…?" whined Rosemonde, completely unable to understand what was happening.
I was fairly certain Pomera and Philia were all right, but I turned back to check on them anyway.
Two giant white hands stretched up from the ground, their fingers interlaced as if holding something precious inside. On the back of one hand was a huge eye; a huge mouth was on the back of the other.
I gawked as the two arms released their intertwined fingers and quickly disappeared back into the earth, revealing my companions standing underneath. The hands must have been something Philia made to shield them from the blast.
"I-I haven't lost yet! No one said magic was my only ability, pal!" said Rosemonde. She tossed aside her cross-shaped staff and rushed toward me. "I'll tear you apart with my gauntlets' claws!"
She stretched out her metal-clad arms. On the tips of her rigid, armor-covered fingers were wicked-looking talons.
"When the magic runs out, there's always melee combat!" cried Rosemonde. "I've got you now!"
Catching Rosemonde's gauntlet in one hand, I gently tossed her to the ground. As she landed, a puff of dust billowed into the air.
"R-really…?" said Rosemonde in distress as she lay spread-eagle on the ground. "This is ridiculous… I am Annihilation Rosemonde, an A-rank adventurer."
Rosemonde pushed herself up with her arms until she was on her knees, then looked up at me.
"Come on, guy," she said with a confused, pleading look. "What gives? Why didn't my Ground Bomb have any effect? It's a seventh-level spell for crying out loud."
Seven was still less than ten.
If the highest spell an A-rank adventurer could use was either seventh or eighth level, then I was willing to bet the cutoff for an S-rank was tenth level. People had been afraid of Notts, but even he hadn't been able to get above tenth level without some serious prep work.
"You probably don't have any magic power left, do you?" I asked. "Can we just call this a draw and get on with our lives?"

“Hah! You’ve underestimated me!” Rosemonde forced herself to her feet but wobbled significantly. There was no way she could keep going. “I can’t let this end with an outsider disrespecting me. I’m a representative of all Manaloch magic users! It may not kill you, but let me show you my secret weapon!”
She turned her back and dashed to where she’d dropped her staff to pick it up. Then she quickly turned back to face me and let out a sigh of relief… perhaps because I hadn’t used the opening to attack.
“Don’t let your guard down, kid! It can mean the end of your life on the battlefield!” she said.
Maybe I *should* have hit her just to make her give up.
“K-Kanata! I think they’ll be here soon! That last explosion made them angry!” called Pomera to me.
“Huh…?” I turned back toward Pomera.
What she was talking about? Then realized I she had to mean the ragni who were underground. Rosemonde’s Ground Bomb had likely sent them into attack mode.
“Are you making fun of me again?! Don’t take your eyes off your opponent during a duel!” shouted Rosemonde, but the ground at her feet split open and dozens of black spiders poured out from below.
It was more than I’d expected, but I was sure that more would be coming soon.
“Wh-what the? Why are there this many?!” Rosemonde readied her large staff even as she whined, “And I’m nearly out of magic…”
Called it.
The ragni were the whole reason she was out here in the first place, but she’d just wasted all her MP trying to have a turf war with us. An A-rank adventurer should have known better. My opinion of the Guild’s rank system just kept getting lower and lower.
I used bare-handed strikes and kicks to take down ragni as they scurried across the ground. Not exactly the fastest way to kill them, but if I used the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, then we weren’t going to be able to harvest their eyes. We needed that cash.
“Okay, champ. I hate to admit it, but we need to team up to squash some bugs. Earth Magic Level 5: Clod Bomb!” I wasn’t sure if that was the last of Rosemunde’s magic, but the blast took out five ragni in one blow.
A fresh wave appeared from the ground around her a moment later. She tried to kick them away, but more kept coming, and they started to crawl up her legs in an attempt to drag her underground.
“Argh, dammit!”
I tore the ragni around me to bits and rushed over to Rosemonde. She was a hothead, but I couldn’t just abandon her.
While I was trying to figure out how to save her, a pure white arm stretched up from the ground. There was a huge mouth on the back of the hand, so it was safe to say this was one of Philia’s summons. I wasn’t sure why she

chose to make things look the way she did, but she certainly had a design aesthetic all her own.
“Hiya!” cried Philia, swinging her arm through the air. The monstrous white arm mimicked the motion and thrust toward Rosemonde. On the upside, all the ragni that were attacking her were either killed or scattered by the impact. On the downside, the sorcerer was also flung backward and crashed into a nearby tree.
“Gawaargh!” Rosemonde let out a pained squawk as she fell to the ground, convulsing in pain.
“Philia-chan?!” I said and turned back to Philia.
“Philia only punched a little, just a tiny bit! You believe Philia, right?” she explained, flapping her arms anxiously. The strange white arm flapped in time with her motions, squishing surrounding ragni as it flailed against the ground.
“Philia-chan… Just focus on finishing off those ones over there!” I pointed in a direction that I hoped would keep everyone else from being hit by a level 1800 homunculus.
At the same time, Rosemonde managed to shakily get to her feet. I was glad to see that she’d survived. Grip shaking, she picked up her staff and leveled it at the rampaging white arm. After spending a few moments watching it pound holes in the ground so it could drag ragni from their tunnels and crush them between its fingers, she opted to turn tail and run away as fast as she could.
“You m-m-monsters!” she cried as she sprinted down the road.
She’s really moving fast for someone who just had a near-death experience. At least this means we won’t have to fight about how to share the eyeballs.
I couldn’t say I was sad to see her go, but I worried about what she might say when she got back to town. She’d had a real up close and personal view of Philia’s…well, *whatever* Philia called the things she summoned.
Thankfully, all Rosemonde had seen of my abilities was that I could cancel out magic spells and throw her to the ground. That wasn’t too bad. I quietly hoped that she was too stunned to understand that the giant white arm had anything to do with Philia.
“D-did Philia do something bad again? Should Philia…make that lady stay quiet?” asked Philia, raising her arm as a large white orb appeared over her head. It had eyes, a nose, a mouth, and ears, but they were all placed randomly around the orb. I had no idea what to call it, but it was just *wrong*.
Philia began to point her arm in the direction of Rosemonde’s retreat, but Pomera firmly grabbed it. “N-no! We don’t want to kill her!”
I breathed a sigh of relief.
“Philia was just going to scare her,” said Philia, dejectedly.
“Kanata! She’s so strong!” Pomera’s face was bright red with exertion, and her arms were trembling as they tried to shove the little girl’s hand back toward the ground.
Philia’s arm didn’t budge an inch.

—3—

I MADE A MAGIC CIRCLE, then pointed my finger and a flash of light blasted the area.
“Space-time Magic Level 10: Dimension Slash!”
The remaining ragni were split in two, bodily fluids oozing from the cuts. Not the most powerful spell I had in my arsenal, but it was plenty for taking out these small fry. It also had the benefit of cutting them in a way that avoided the eye, which we needed.
I moved toward Philia and Pomera, leaving the dead bodies of the ragni behind.
“A-amazing.” Pomera gave up trying to physically restrain Philia as she looked at all the spider corpses laying around the area.
“Sometimes it’s better to use a low-level spell,” I said.
“…A low-level spell?” Pomera seemed confused.
“Philia-chan, could you make that go away?” I said, pointing at the Picasso-esque orb floating in the air.
“Won’t Kanata be in trouble if the Rosemonde lady tells people?” asked Philia, still looking down the road in the direction of Manaloch.
“I think it’s probably okay.” I hoped it would be, anyway.
Philia shrugged and made the mystery orb disappear. Pomera looked incredibly relieved.
“By the way, what was that thing?” I asked.
“A Creepy Ball!” said Philia proudly.
Yes. Yes, it was.
“What does it do?” I asked.
“Oh! It gets squishy, and glurpy, and swirly, and then, um, it gets crazy, and then, uuuuh…” Philia resorted to hand gestures and strange poses when words failed her. I had no idea what she meant, but I got the impression that was for the best.
“Philia will show Pomera and Kanata next time!” she concluded.
I sincerely hope there is never a next time.
After that, the three of us threw ourselves wholeheartedly into taking out the next wave of ragni. I found that kicking the ones that were right next to me and using Dimension Slash to slice up the ones farther away seemed to work pretty well. Soon, spider pieces were scattered everywhere.
Dimension Slash was easier to use than I had expected, and I was surprised to find it super adjustable compared to bigger spells like Gravity Bomb. Instead of doing massive damage to the whole body of the target, its razor-thin magic blade made clean cuts that left materials intact for gathering after the fight. Since it wasn’t much use against the demons in the Warped Mirror of the Cursed Realm, I’d never given it much of a chance. After

seeing how it exterminated entire waves of ragni, I started to change my mind.
Pomera raised her staff and pointed it at a gathering group of spiders.
“Spirit Magic Level 5: Firefly!”
A sphere of bright red fire appeared and flew toward her target before exploding in flames. The spiders caught in the blast were charred and sent tumbling. Thankfully the blast was just weak enough that it wouldn’t destroy any of their eyes. They might be a little burned, but we could still turn them in.
For her part, Philia raised her hands and two pure-white arms rose from the ground.
“Aaaand, boom!”
Phila clapped her hands and the white arms mimicked her motions. Their palms swept together, scooping up dirt and ragni alike. More than ten ragni were squished between the hands, their bodily fluids spewing from between giant fingers. A squashed eyeball popped out and bounced across the ground. I hoped the rest were still recognizable.
Before long, only one of the nearly sixty ragni remained.
“Space-time Magic Level 4: Short Gate.”
I landed behind the ragno that was trying to run away and made a slashing motion with my finger. A Dimension Slash sliced it into two.
“Amazing, Kanata! It’s so neat to see you use space-time magic, since it’s your specialty!” said Pomera excitedly as she came over.
“I’d say my main focus is fire magic, even though I don’t get to use it much anymore. Lunaère-san specialized in space-time magic…maybe. She used it a lot, anyway.”
Come to think of it, I’d never seen her in a tight spot where she had to push herself to cast her most powerful spells. It was quite possible that space-time magic *wasn’t* her specialty. Maybe she just liked space-time magic because it was so convenient. She was probably actually best at death magic, since she had mentioned that being a lich naturally increased her power in it.
For the moment, space-time magic was a means to an end. It did a lot less collateral damage than fire magic and kept monster parts in one piece for harvesting. If I used fire magic to get rid of the ragni, there was a good chance I’d set the whole forest on fire. For a guy trying to keep his level under wraps, I didn’t think that would be a smart thing to do.
I guessed that meant Lunaère and I were two peas in a pod when it came to using magic that wasn’t our main focus.
“Huh…? R-really? So, this whole time you’ve been using magic that isn’t your primary strength…?” Pomera’s mouth hung open in shock, but then she shook her head and her expression returned to normal. “You’re full of surprises, Kanata. It never seems to end.”

“If I surprise you that much, just wait until you meet Lunaère-san…*if* you ever meet Lunaère-san, that is. You never know what kind of surprises she has up her sleeve,” I said.
Pomera’s eyes looked distant, like she was having an epiphany. I wasn’t sure that I liked whatever conclusions she was jumping to.
“You really care for Lunaère, don’t you, Kanata?” said Pomera, and I jumped slightly.
I was pretty sure that I’d convinced Pomera that Lunaère was an old lady. Even so, I wondered if she might have guessed the truth, based on how fondly I spoke of Lunaère. I was trying not to sound like I was talking about a girl I had a crush on.
“Y-yeah, I do. She’s kind of like family. Since, you know, she’s an old lady and all…” I said.
“I-I already know her age, you told me before. Now it sounds like you’re making an excuse…” Pomera looked at me suspiciously.
I said a little silent apology to Lunaère. I was stacking lies on top of lies. I didn’t know how many years it would be until I saw Lunaère again, but I was going to feel guilty the next time I looked her in the face.
“Anyway, we did it, Kanata! We’ll make a lot of money from this!” said Pomera, turning to the mountain of ragno corpses.
With sixty dead ragni at twenty-five grand an eyeball, we’d make roughly 1.3 million gold. That was easy money, and a good start toward funding our alchemy experiments.
“Maybe we’ll get those Blood Ethers of the Gods after all! We’ll be back to raising your level in the Cursed Mirror in no time,” I said with a smile.
Pomera did not smile. “Um… You really plan on starting that again?” she asked quietly. “I don’t really think we need to do that much.”
I got the impression that Pomera didn’t actually want to power level inside the Cursed Mirror anymore. I wanted to reassure her that she would definitely get used to it soon, but I didn’t want to ignore her feelings.
“Only if you want to, that is,” I said.
“Oh… Is that okay?”
I’d been brought to this world by Naiarotop and the other gods as some sort of sick entertainment. That fact alone made it obvious that I was going to be thrown into conflicts with other travelers, evil adventurers, and monsters. I was far from safe, no matter how high I raised my level.
I was pretty certain I was in the upper ranges of power for this world, but the mysterious stranger we’d run into in Manaloch was proof that I couldn’t relax. There would always be someone stronger than me in this world.
But Pomera’s situation was different. As soon as we parted ways, her current level would put her in a class of adventurers where she would be able to live in peace and safety forever.
“I’d be sad to see you go,” I said, “but you don’t have any obligation to stay with me. I would understand if you wanted to strike out on your own.”
“Huh? I-Is that what would happen?” asked Pomera.

“Look, I’m basically cursed. Chances are good that I’ll end up getting pulled into a lot of bad situations. At your current level, it’s really dangerous to hang around with me. Maybe things are fine right now, but it’s risky for us to be partners without getting you to a higher level so you can hold your own against whatever they decide to throw at me. But you don’t have to stay.”
I’d graduated from Lunaère’s intensive training. Considering that, I’d be happiest to get Pomera to around level 3,000—or around level 2,000 like Philia at the very least. Being at level 200 seemed like a dangerous place to be—just strong enough to attract a lot of attention, but not strong enough to hold her own.
“S-something must have happened in your past. I suppose I can understand.” Pomera gulped. She closed her eyes, like she wanted to think for just a moment. Then, decision made, she opened them wide again. She took my hand in her hands and squeezed tightly.
“Pomera-san?” I asked, taken off guard by her attitude.
“I want to get strong enough to be able to support you! If it’s not too much of an imposition, I want to stay by your side!”
“Do you mean you’ll go all in on leveling in the Cursed Mirror too?”
“Y-yes, of course. I-I’ll do my best,” said Pomera quietly.
I squeezed her hands back. “Thank you! I still don’t know enough about this world, and we’ve become so close, I didn’t want to see you go.”
“R-really?” Pomera blinked a few times, then pulled her arms back. Her cheeks turned bright red while she played with her hair in embarrassment. “You didn’t want to see me go? Hee hee… I’ll work really hard!”
“Philia wants to train in the mirror too!” said Philia, cutting in to the conversation.
Philia…but stronger?! That’s just frightening.
I shuddered at the thought. Though to be fair, we probably wouldn’t need to dope her up with elixirs or worry about the Ouroboros Ring. No matter how many times I’d killed her in Grand’s mansion, she’d just kept coming back stronger than before.
“Kanata? Philia can train too, right?” asked Philia, looking up at me with puppy-dog eyes.
“Uhhh…” I waffled, but Pomera jumped to my rescue.
“N-no, Philia, you shouldn’t do it! Really. It’s not very fun at all! Just be good and listen to Kanata!” said Pomera. Then she looked around at the scattered spider corpses that littered the forest around us. “Besides…now we need to gather up the ragno eyes, right? How should we do that?”
“We should probably try to gather them in one place. Seems like it’ll be a lot of work to do just that,” I said. A Gravity Bomb could have pulled them all to the center of the clearing, but it would destroy all the eyes in the process… not to mention the damage it would do the trees.
“Philia will do it!” said Philia as she moved in front of me and raised her arms.

The familiar white arms rose from the ground and started sweeping their palms across the forest floor like a waiter brushing crumbs from a table. In a matter of moments, all the dead ragni were in a neat pile at our feet.
“Philia’s amazing, right? Right?!” she said, giggling.
“Th-thank you, Philia-chan,” I said. She *was* amazing.
Pomera and I went to work with our knives, cutting out the eyes. Philia spawned more arms, smaller ones this time, and began an assembly line that plucked the eyes out of the dead spiders. She was much more efficient at the task than we were. After watching her remove ten eyes for every one we could collect, Pomera and I gave up and let her do the rest.
“Say Philia’s amazing!” She flapped her arms up and down, looking proud of herself. The eye-plucking arms flapped as well.
“Ph-Philia is amazing!” I definitely didn’t want her doing this in front of anyone in Manaloch.
The sight of the arms sprouting from the ground like weird, pale plants was uncanny. Even Pomera looked at a loss for words as she stared at the forest of waving limbs.
“A-anyway,” she said after taking a moment to compose herself, “I think we can assume these ragni are just a fraction of the total…”
“Is the scale of this stampede that abnormal?” I asked, and Pomera nodded.
“This would normally be impossible near a city—especially one with two active A-rank adventurers.”
Alfred and Rosemonde. Alfred was supposedly just visiting, but I’d heard that Manaloch was home to other A-rank adventurers. There was also an S-rank adventurer, but maybe that was just a rumor. In any case, it sounded like this was a serious problem that could only be solved by getting all the high-ranked adventurers to work together.
Was humanity doomed in Locklore? I now knew how weak A-rank adventurers really were, but this was a world where I’d run into Zolophilia not long after coming out of Cocytus. It seemed like the people lived in a constant state of peril where even the heroes who were their best hopes weren’t much help at all.
“Even Rosemonde had a hard time with these ragni…” I said.
Granted, she had used a significant amount of her magic when she attacked me and had already been damaged herself in that fight. But I still couldn’t imagine her taking on sixty ragni and emerging victorious. She might give them a run for their money, but then again…
“That’s why this is all so strange,” said Pomera. “Monster stampedes happen sometimes, but they’re really rare. Outbreaks of this size have been happening all around Manaloch. It’s just…*weird*.”
“The guild workers did say it was a special situation.”
That did explain why the reward for ragno eyes was so good. Manaloch was probably in a far more precarious situation than the authorities were letting on.

Pomera thought to herself for a moment. “This city has plenty of high-rank adventurers, and they should be doing regular exterminations. That means the ragni are multiplying faster than the adventurers can hunt them.”
That was a troubling thought. If that was really the case, all of Locklore would end up buried in spiders pretty soon. Gross.
“Maybe we should have been a bit more cautious,” I said. “We sort of jumped on this request because the reward was so good. We were fine this time, but…”
Pomera chuckled. “You would probably still be fine even if you weren’t careful.”
I was being serious, but Pomera waved her hand across the battleground to illustrate her point. I smiled awkwardly and took a swig of water from my waterskin.
Pomera jumped in surprise and quickly got to her feet.
“K-Kanata, something’s coming! Monsters…and there’s also a person! I think they’re running from the monsters!”
“I don’t think we need to worry that much. It’s probably just more ragni.”
Even if I was wrong, the monsters probably posed no real threat to us.
“No! Kanata, there’s *someone coming*!” said Pomera, gesturing at Philia’s forest of arms. “We have to do something about those!”
“Gah!” I accidentally inhaled some of the water I was trying to drink. Pressing a hand to my throat, I threw my waterskin on the ground and turned to Philia. “Philia-chan! Get rid of them! Just for a bit! Please! I can’t explain, but it’ll be really bad if you don’t!”
Philia looked perplexed for a moment, but then she smiled and dismissed her forest of arms. They faded into light and the ragno corpses they were holding fell to the ground. I heaved a sigh of relief.
Out from the forest ran Rosemonde, still covered in wounds. Her armor seemed to have a few new cracks, and it looked like she’d run into trouble before making it back to Manaloch.
“Yo! Can I get a little help, guys?! I’m sure you can handle them!” screamed Rosemonde, her face pale. A group of ragni chased along behind her, including three enormous ragni that were almost six feet tall.
There are bigger versions?!
“Sh-she’s got some nerve…” huffed Pomera as she looked at Rosemonde.
I knew that luring a herd of monsters toward other adventurers could be considered a criminal offense, but this seemed to be an act of desperation rather than malice.
“Large ragni, hmm…” The Guild’s information guide didn’t include any information on the bigger spiders.
“Heeey, you jerks, draw the attention of the big ones! They’ll eat me if you don’t do something!” Rosemonde continued to scream and curse at us as she ran in a circle around the clearing, trying to stay ahead of the pack.
She’d had a serious change of attitude since we last saw her. Maybe that just went to show how dangerous the ragni were.

“Those big guys are no joke! Their shells are too thick and half-assed attacks won’t get through!” She sounded winded but was still trying to get us to take some of the heat off of her. “I might be able to handle one, but not this many! Get their attention somehow!”
Are the big ones specialized in defense?
“Aaagh!” Rosemonde tripped and stumbled as more spiders leapt out of the ground in a sneak attack. As she went down, the regular-sized ragni swarmed to cover her legs as the big ones closed in.
“Aw, gimme a break! You don’t want to eat me! I taste terrible!” she shouted.
I leapt between Rosemonde and one of the big spiders. I was ready to attack with my sword, since her life was on the line.
“Kanata!” shouted Pomera. “Don’t do that! I mean, I don’t think you need to use that—!”
I drew the sword and, in the same motion, sliced through the large ragno. The force from the attack shattered the surface of the ground and sent the smaller spiders flying. A number of trees nearby fell as the shock wave reached the edge of the forest.
The large ragno was sliced in half, turning into black sand as it fell.
“Ugh, overkill again…” I slid my sword back into its sheath. Next to me was Rosemonde, her mouth agape as she stared up at me.
“No way, kid… I couldn’t even scratch them,” she said.
“Uh…are you okay?” I asked.
“For real, I’d have been fine if I started the fight in good condition,” said Rosemonde adamantly.
“S-sure…”
Philia came over to my side. She raised her right hand and a white arm grew from the ground ahead of us. I would have preferred it if Rosemonde didn’t see that, but that cat was already out of the bag.
The single round eye on the back of the hand stared at Rosemonde for a moment, then winked. Philia looked very proud of herself. I had a feeling the extra touch was meant to be reassuring, but…it did not have the desired effect.
Rosemonde looked horrified, her eyes locked on the white arm.
“Hiya!” Philia let out a cute battle cry and closed her hand into a fist. The large hand crushed another large ragno, squirting juices everywhere. Having thick exoskeletons weren’t working out so well for them.
Rosemonde looked up in astonishment for a little while, but then suddenly started slapping herself in the face.
“Wh-what are you doing?! You’re already injured enough!” I yelled.
“Get it together, Rosemonde!” she muttered like she was talking to herself. “I am… I am Annihilation Rosemonde, an A-rank adventurer! These guys are just freaks!”
She was covered in ragno bites, but I was starting to think her head might have taken a few hits too.

Pomera brandished her staff at the remaining large ragno. “Spirit Magic Level 8: Laelaps’s Fang!”
A hound formed of lightning appeared before the white mage, sprinting toward her foe and leaving destruction in its wake. It overran the regular ragni in its path, trampling and burning them as it advanced. As it made contact with the large ragno at the back of the pack, the massive bug convulsed and smoldered before dropping to the ground in a smoking heap.
“That’s it for the big ones, Kanata! Let’s finish off the rest!” she said and began lobbing spells at the disorganized groups of ragni scuttling around in confusion.
Rosemonde stared at Pomera’s spell, her face blank.
“C-calm down. I could pull something like that off. Probably. I’m… I’m plenty strong …” Rosemonde dropped her head. She had been kneeling on the ground, but she shifted so she was sitting and pulled her knees to her chest. “I don’t know what’s real anymore…”
Apparently, Rosemunde was ready to reconcile with two overpowered adventurers, but three crossed the line.
“Both the guy and the kid are wicked strong, but…even that dumb-looking chick can pop out a level-eight spell like it’s nothing!”
“Rude!” snapped Pomera in between killing a few more ragni.
Rosemonde didn’t seem to notice that Pomera was offended. She just kept talking to herself. “On top of that, it was spirit magic. That’s hard to control! And… And she didn’t end up getting herself caught in it. Look at me, I put on this heavy, hard-to-move-in armor and work all by myself because I wanted to focus on this battle style…”
I wasn’t expecting to deal with someone’s existential crisis on top of these ragni.
After finishing off her share of spiders, Pomera used white magic to heal Rosemonde. The A-rank adventurer was still only half with it. Her wounds hadn’t been life-threatening, but she was covered in ragno bites wherever her armor had failed.
Philia and I got to work harvesting eyes. It was a grisly job and my arms were soon sticky with ragno goo. I began to worry that this wasn’t a wholesome activity for a kid like Philia.
“Kanata! This eyeball is super huge! It’s like ten eyeballs, but one!” Covered in blood, Philia lifted the dripping eye of one of the large ragni over her head.
Nah. She’s fine.
“I think…that’s all of the ragno eyes,” I said a while later as I finished harvesting the last one.
To start, we’d had around sixty ragno eyes. Rosemonde had drawn at least another forty to us. That gave us about one hundred all together.
There had been three large ragni. One had turned to sand, courtesy of the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh—I really needed to knock that off. Another had been burned pretty badly by Pomera’s spell, but the burnt eye was still

intact. It would be proof of a kill, even if it was halfway to being charcoal. The eye from the large ragno that Philia had squished was in perfect shape, surprisingly enough.
“I think that should be about 2.5 million gold,” I said.
We could also expect some sort of additional compensation for the two large ragni. I wasn’t sure how much they’d be worth, but I was hoping they’d fetch at least a hundred thousand gold.
I was in high spirits. With this, we had enough money to freely conduct alchemy experiments. We could keep collecting eyes for the rest of the day, but this was probably enough for now. Besides, we could turn these in without drawing too much attention.
“Oh, by the way,” I said, “did you defeat any ragni, Rosemonde? We’ll help you go gather them up.”
“…Forget it. I just want to go home and go back to bed.”
“A-all right.”
Rosemonde looked deflated—literally. She looked smaller than when we’d first met. Part of it was probably because a lot of her armor had been torn off, but she slouched as we started to walk back to Manaloch.
Thankfully, she promised that she wouldn’t tell people about us in return for us keeping quiet about how our fight went. She didn’t think anyone would believe her, anyway.
Rosemonde was a hotheaded person, but I didn’t get the impression that she held a needless grudge. I didn’t think she’d sell us out, especially since we’d saved her life.
“Those big ragni… More trouble is coming to Manaloch,” muttered Rosemonde to herself. “I’ve gotta decide if I’m going to leave or stay and fight…”

—4—

WE PARTED WAYS outside the entrance to the Adventurers’ Guild.
Rosemonde just wanted to go home, and we needed to turn in our bounties.
“I can already taste the Blood Ether of the Gods!” I said.
“Hee hee, it makes me happy to see you so excited,” said Pomera with a smile.
“We’ll start raising your level in the Cursed Mirror again once the ethers are done.”
“…Sure.” Oddly, Pomera stopped smiling.
“Philia wants to try some! Kanata, are the ethers yummy?” asked Philia.
“Well, they’re sort of odd, but, yeah, I guess I’d say they taste pretty nice.”
At a few million gold each, they’d *better* taste nice.
“Really?! Philia wants to drink some and get super strong in the mirror!”
This was going to be a problem. I needed to come up with a way to let her down easy and avoid a tantrum.

“Eh… Don’t worry about it, Philia,” I said. “You can have a little sip, and we won’t even make you train in the mirror.”
“But Philia *wants* to train with Kanata and Pomera …” Her face fell into a dejected frown.
“W-well… We’ll talk about it later.”
“Yay! Philia can’t wait! Thank you, Kanata!”
Wh-what should I do? Maybe I just have to keep leveling myself to stay ahead of her…
I tried to get us back on track. “Well, let’s get these turned in for our reward.”
The Guild was shockingly rowdy that afternoon. It was nothing like the civilized atmosphere we had encountered earlier that day. Maybe the other adventurers had realized just how bad the situation with the ragni was.
A crowd of people surrounded the reception area and in the center was a head of majestic blond hair. Looked like the cool kids had beaten us back.
“Oh look, it’s Alfred. You’re his biggest fan, right, Kanata?” Pomera looked at me with narrowed eyes.
“I-I think there’s been a misunderstanding…” I tried to explain my reasoning, “I’m just really interested in his persona. He’s putting on a show of being all big and mighty because he’s a traveling adventurer and…”
“S-so what if he’s an A-rank adventurer?” huffed Pomera. “I could be an A-rank adventurer too. I bet Rosemonde’s a better adventurer than he is.”
“Well, he’s about to turn in his bounties. We’ll know if he can back up his bravado in a few minutes.”
There were a lot of jeers coming from the adventurers around Alfred. Most of the male adventurers seemed like they wanted to take him down a peg—probably because he’d called them all cowards before he left to go hunting that morning. I didn’t know how things worked between feuding adventurers, but that had been a clear declaration of war.
Alfred looked around, let out a heavy sigh, and held the back of his hand to his forehead.
“Does there have to be such a commotion every time I kill a monster?” he said theatrically. “My, oh my, is this the state of adventuring in Manaloch? Why don’t you lot try focusing on your own efforts instead of other people’s?”
The temperature in the Guild dropped a few degrees and the room went silent.
“K-Kanata, this seems kind of…hostile,” whispered Pomera.
“Focusing on your own efforts instead of other people’s…? Hm, there may be some truth to that…” I muttered, nodding slightly a couple of times in agreement. He had a point—why were people obsessed with what he was about to turn in instead of getting out there and doing their best?
Pomera gave me a disgusted look. “You do have some weird obsession with him, don’t you, Kanata?”
“N-no, I just think that what he’s saying isn’t wrong…”

“It doesn’t make him any less of a heel.”
I stood at the back of the crowd and craned my neck to watch. Minding our own business aside, I still wanted to see what this guy was about to turn in. Besides, I liked people-watching, and maybe this would give me some more insight into how things worked in Locklore. It helped that I wasn’t the only person staring.
“Let’s go, Kanata. There’s another receptionist free, thanks to that jerk Alfred drawing all the attention.” Pomera grabbed me by the robe and started pulling me toward the other desk.
“F-fine, okay. Just one minute.”
“Watch while we’re walking.” Pomera let out a heavy sigh.
Alfred made a grand show of looking around and let out a loud snort.
“Is this a guild, or a circus?” he asked, upending his magic bag on the desk and a large amount of ragno eyes tumbled out. The Guild was filled with gasps.
“A-amazing… Guess his A-rank isn’t just for show.”
“Tsk, if he’s acting like that was nothing, why doesn’t he have more of them?”
It was a sizable pile, but I knew we had more.
“Such a fuss over nothing,” said Alfred. “I was simply lucky. Just as I exited the city, I found a large group of ragnos. I hardly broke a sweat, and I’d have even more eyes if they’d crossed my path. Here are the remains of all the normal ragnos I killed this morning.”
“G-good job, Alfred! I’ll get your money right away!” The receptionist seemed ecstatic.
Pomera pulled on my arm to keep us moving toward the other desk.
“Are you satisfied now, Kanata? Come on, let’s go.”
“Uh… Yeah.”
Just as the crowd was about to disperse, Alfred cleared his throat loudly. I stopped, my eyes glued back on him.
“My dear Guild girl…don’t get ahead of yourself,” he said. “I only said that that was all of the normal ragnos I’d killed.”
“It’s *ragni,*” I heard Pomera mutter under her breath.
“Uh… You have something else?” asked the receptionist attending to Alfred.
Alfred huffed and closed his eyes, placing a finger on his nose like he was annoyed by something. Yes, he was a heel, but the theatrics drew me in. I was transfixed.
“He should have started off with that,” said Pomera, glaring in frustration at Alfred.
“What’s wrong? Why do you hate Alfred so much?” I asked.
“I’m sick of his attitude. Doesn’t he bother you?”
To be honest, I wasn’t *bothered* by anything Alfred did. It was kind of like watching a pro wrestler performing in character.
Alfred stuck his hand into his magic bag and rummaged around.

“I suspected that there might be something causing this abnormal surge in ragno activity,” he said. “I hunted down the creeping evil and defeated it, as was my duty. The city of Manaloch is safe once more.”
The Guild exploded with cries at Alfred’s words. What could he have found? Had there been some sort of artifact that was drawing the ragni close to the city? Had some sort of monster been leading them? I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Alfred’s hand as it fished around in his magic bag.
“Kanata, I’ve never seen you rummage through your magic bag like that. It just produces what you’re looking for right away, right? He’s obviously just putting on a big show.” Pomera tugged on my arm and pointed at Alfred like she was tattling on a classmate.
“J-just hang on a second. I want to see what this is!” I said, brushing her hand off as I focused on Alfred.
With all eyes in the Guild on Alfred, he pulled a large ragno eye from his bag.
What?! That’s it?!
“Behold, the eye of a massive ragno. I have slain the leader of the ragnos swarming the region around Manaloch. It was a far more dangerous monster than a normal ragno, but it was no match for me.”
The crowd let out cries of admiration and started clapping, showering Alfred in words of praise. I just squinted and stared at the large eye.
“We’ve got two of those,” I said.
Would’ve been three, if I hadn’t used the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh. Including Alfred’s eye, that meant at least four of the big guys had been killed. Those large spiders weren’t leaders or anything like that. They were just bigger versions of the same mindless regular ragni.
“Yep,” said Pomera looking smug.
“Let’s go turn these in,” I said and Pomera nodded wordlessly. We walked over to the receptionist with no one in line, but he was so absorbed in watching Alfred that he wouldn’t look at us.
“Hi there! We accepted the request for hunting ragni and we’d like to collect our reward,” I said.
“Ugh, could you wait a minute? They’re talking about how the leader of the ragni was just defeated…” complained the receptionist as he turned and put a box on the counter to collect our monster parts.
“Here you go,” I said and turned my magic bag upside down. I shook the bag and ragno eyes came tumbling out, overflowing the box to roll across the desk. The Guild employee’s boredom turned into astonishment as he watched the eyes pour out endlessly and realized what was going on.
I hadn’t wanted to stand out too much, but I did want to establish that we were A-rank material. With three of us in the party, this was within the believable limits.
“Th-this is so many!” stuttered the guild worker.

Finally, the two large eyes plopped on top of the pile and the guild worker's jaw dropped. They glanced over at Alfred, then looked back at the eyes I'd dumped out.
"Ahem. And these are…?" they said, pointing at the large eyes.
"I think there's probably a lot more of those still out there," I said.
I had thought of leaving those large eyes out, since the 2.5 million from the hundred normal ragno eyes would be plenty, but I couldn't let Alfred's false claim take root. If the authorities decided that he'd really killed the ragno leader, then the situation could get even worse in short order.
Spectators that had been clustered around Alfred began to take notice.
"Hey, these guys are pretty amazing too!"
"Dang! That's a lot of eyes!"
"What's this, you lot are still here?" said Alfred as he noticed the voices starting to rise around him. "Why aren't you out improving yourselves instead of idolizing me? Only fools get swept away by that kind of… Huh?"
Alfred realized the crowd was paying attention to someone else. Looking around for what was drawing them away, his eyes fell on me. I gave him *The Nod*.
His brow furrowed into a shocked glare.
M-maybe I overplayed that. His heel act is closer to reality than I thought…
The guild worker was still staring at our pile of eyes, his face paling.
"P-please wait here a moment. The management needs to be made aware of this! We've got big problems around Manaloch."
"You think so?" I asked.
I had been worried that that the city might not have the resources to deal with the problem, and I had been hoping I was wrong. Lunaère had said there were times in Locklore's history when large countries were suddenly destroyed by monster-related disasters. Manaloch was a snooty town full of snooty individuals, but they didn't deserve that.
"I probably shouldn't tell you this, but the Guild leaders said that if we found evidence of multiple stronger versions of the ragni, then the city could be at risk…" said the guild worker quietly, fear in his eyes.
I wasn't surprised that the administration had been on the lookout, but I was unsettled that they'd kept it this quiet for this long. Hopefully they had a plan.
"Sorry," said the guild worker. "I shouldn't spread rumors, so forget what I said. Anyway, I need to make sure that management knows about this as soon as possible. I'll make sure you get a bonus for the large eyes, of course. I'll be back with the gold in a few moments."
He bowed and hurried into the back.
"Hey! Just who the hell are you guys, anyway?" shouted someone in the crowd. "You're not from this city. There's no way you could have been here the whole time. Are you travelers like Alfred?"
"Uh, yeah. We're adventurers from Arroburg…" I said.

Another man stepped to the front of the crowd. He wore a black, pointed hat, and had dark circles beneath his eyes. It took a moment, but I realized he was the man who'd tried to talk to Pomera right after we arrived with the caravan.
The man tilted his hat and shouted back at the crowd, "None of you heard of the Evil Priest Notts, the humanoid dragon that terrorized Arroburg? Well, this lady here is Saint Pomera. She single-handedly healed the people of Arroburg and destroyed the manor where Notts was hiding."
"Wha…?" Pomera's eyes grew wide.
The Guild descended into an uproar, with some voices claiming that was impossible, and others saying they'd heard the news.
"On top of that," continued the man with the pointed hat, "she can use a spirit in the shape of a massive dragon. I saw it with my own eyes. It's definitely true. She's the real deal—she can use healing magic, use attack magic, and she can even use summoning magic to boot!"
"Is this…Philia's fault?" Philia asked quietly, pointing to herself.
"I also heard that when she was rushing around healing those injured by Notts, she healed an elderly person's eyes. For the first time in fifty years, they opened their eyes and saw the world…" said the man.
I glanced at Pomera and she shook her head vigorously. Now this guy was just making stuff up.
"Absurd!"
"I heard that too!"
Insults were flung around the Guild. The situation was getting out of hand.
"Don't go spreading rumors!" shouted Pomera to the man in the black hat, her face red.
"Out of my way," came a voice that cut easily through the rest.
I turned to look and saw the crowd part to make a path. Alfred walked briskly down the open space, right toward us. There were deep furrows in his brow as he glared at us.
I was a bit nervous. I forced myself to stand up straighter and meet the challenge.
His level was nothing special, and his haul of ragno eyes was quite a bit smaller than ours—but Alfred played the adventurer game. If this was the life that I was destined to live in Locklore, then I could learn from his example. I just wasn't yet sure if his was a good example or a bad one.
"Hey, you," he said.
"Can I help you?" I replied.
"Not you! Get away from me!" he shouted. "I'm talking to the girl, not her flunky!"
"S-sorry!"
The cool-guy act seemed to have evaporated.
"Excuse me?!" Pomera decided that she'd had enough of Alfred's nonsense. With a scowl, she gripped her staff tightly and took a step toward the guy, who was nearly twice her height. "Apologize to Kanata this instant!"

“Pah! It’s you who should apologize for spreading baseless claims about your deeds! It’s an insult to the hard work of our fellow adventurers! Is your ego really that fragile?”
“I wasn’t the one who said those things!” Pomera was snarling now, and pointed at Pointy Hat. “If you have a problem with the rumors, take it up with him!”
“I’m not concerned with the stories about Notts! I’m talking about the ragnos! Who sold you those eyes? You couldn’t have defeated that many on your own. And then you had the gall to parade them about next to me! It’s shameful!” Alfred’s face turned crimson as he shouted.
“You’re just embarrassed by your puny haul! That’s not my fault! You strut about, all full of yourself…and you only managed to kill forty rag*ni*! What’s shameful is the scene you’re causing! And Kanata is not a flunky! Apologize to him right now!”
“C-calm down, Pomera-san. To be honest, I don’t care.” She was a lot stronger now that she had trained in the Mirror, and it was taking some serious effort to hold her back. I’d never seen her this angry before.
“That’s big talk coming from a C-rank brat!” Alfred flared his nostrils and bared his teeth in rage.
The swordswoman with short hair appeared behind Alfred. I vaguely remembered her name was Sera. She wrapped her arms around him and tried to pull him back.
“S-stop it, sir! Everyone’s watching! I am so sorry. He sometimes has these fits!” she said.
“Sera, let go! Are you trying to embarrass me?!”
Wh-what is with this guy…?
“You’re managing that just fine on your own! Please, let’s just leave!”
“Quiet! What part of ‘let go’ don’t you understand?!” Alfred swung his arm and knocked Sera back.
Sera crashed to the ground with a pained “oof!” Alfred shot her a glare, then immediately turned back to Pomera.
“Fine. So be it. If you insist that you actually hunted those…” He motioned to the pile of spider eyes on the counter, “Then you can provide me with proof.”
He drew his sword and lightly slashed the air. Shouts ran through the crowd.
“I have no intention of backing down when you’ve offended my honor. Come outside with me, *Saint* Pomera. I will show you for the fraud you truly are.”
My opinion of Alfred was dropping fast. Pomera frowned as she and Alfred glared at each other.
She turned back to me and said through bared teeth, “Do you mind, Kanata?”
She wasn’t asking me if I minded her beating the snot out of Alfred. She was asking if I minded blowing our cover of being regular C-rank

adventurers. It seemed like all our effort to not stand out kept getting undone by emerging situations.
Well, I figured it shouldn't be a problem as long as people believed she was only *slightly* stronger than Alfred. From a money standpoint, it might even be good because it could help us move up a rank or two at the Guild. Still, if it could be avoided, I would prefer if the outcome let us slide back under the radar.
I waved for Pomera to come closer. She leaned in and I whispered:
"If you're asking what I think you're asking, just hold back a bit. But wouldn't it be better to just apologize and be done with it?"
"I can hear you," came a voice.
I looked over and saw Alfred's head right next to Pomera's. He was glaring at me with bloodshot eyes.
"Gah!" I reflexively pulled back. I hadn't expected him to eavesdrop so blatantly.
Alfred swung his sword. The blade sliced through the reception counter and into the Guild's polished floor, a white whisp of smoke rising from the heat of the friction. The crowd gasped.
"He's telling you to hold back?! You dare insult me further?!" asked Alfred.
"I accept your duel," said Pomera, and Alfred's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "I don't care if you refuse to believe those ridiculous things about me. Or the ragni—I only hunted them for the money, anyway." She raised a warning finger. "But first, I have one condition for our duel."
"A condition?"
"If I win, I want you to apologize to Kanata. You know nothing about him! Kanata is the first person to ever allow me to be an equal member of a party!"
"Fine, I'll accept whatever conditions you have. I don't intend to lose. Let's go." Alfred walked outside and Pomera followed, seething.
"P-Pomera-san, I'm glad you get so angry in my defense… But really, it'd be best if you didn't fight him." I said, trying to follow along. Philia passed me and skipped along Pomera's side.
"Philia wants to fight with Pomera too!" she said, her eyes sparkling.
"N-no, Philia-chan! This is Pomera's fight." I took her gently by the arm. Alfred needed to be humbled, not buried.

—5—

THE CROWD FORMED a circle in front of the Guild. Alfred and Pomera faced each other in the center, and I ended up being just another face in the crowd.
How the hell did this happen?
They were standing about fifteen feet apart. Alfred could close that distance with just a couple steps.

“You’re a magic user, so I’ll step back to give you a little more space to fight,” said Alfred. “There’s no point in winning if I’ve got an unfair advantage.”
“I’m fine,” said Pomera, “I’d rather not listen to your weak excuses afterward.”
“Foolish girl.”
This was the first time I’d ever heard Pomera trash talk, and it was a little jarring. Anyway, she was almost three times Alfred’s level. No matter what happened, I couldn’t see Pomera losing this fight.
“Good luck, Pomera! Good luck!” shouted Philia, waving with a smile of enjoyment.
Alfred’s companion, Sera, took on the role of signaling the start of the duel, but she didn’t look happy about it. She normally admired Alfred, but at the moment, she seemed really put out.
“The duel will be decided when one person admits defeat or becomes incapacitated. Begin!” Sera dropped her hand.
As soon as she did, Alfred dashed toward Pomera, closing the distance. He drew his sword, aiming to cut Pomera’s staff with the slash.
“Spirit Magic Level 6: Fox Fire!” Pomera fell back while raising her staff and making a magic circle. A flaming sphere about the size of a human head appeared in the air in front of her.
Fox Fire borrowed a ball of flame from one of the fox spirits residing within the spirit world. It had some limited intelligence and would automatically move to shield the caster.
It seemed like she was trying to defeat Alfred without steamrolling him or tossing out any high-level, high-power spells. I felt a little relieved.
Alfred leapt sideways in an attempt to avoid the Fox Fire and struck at Pomera with his sword. The ball of flame kept itself between them, and the white mage moved to make sure she was always hidden behind the orb.
“How annoying. I guess you aren’t just a weakling,” said Alfred.
“Spirit Magic Level 3: Sylph Sword!” Pomera stepped from behind Fox Fire to point her staff at Alfred. A blade of air slashed toward him, and he barely had time to raise his sword to parry it away.
Alfred lunged back toward Pomera, but the Fox Fire slipped gracefully between them. Pomera hopped around the opposite side of the orb to level her staff again.
“Sylph Sword!”
“Gah!”
This time, he was too close to parry. His knees dragged across the cobblestones as the impact forced him to the ground.
Alfred glared at Pomera, or at least he tried. The Fox Fire bobbed left and right, keeping itself in line with his stare. Frustration showed on his face as he tried to figure out how to get around the spell.
“This is way less exciting than I thought it’d be,” came a voice from the crowd, followed by others of similar opinion.

Smart move, Pomera! She's actually trying to make this as boring as possible.
If she wanted to, Pomera could have turned Alfred to ash with a single high-level spell, but word of that would spread like…well, like wildfire. Instead, she was thinning out the crowd by keeping things slow-paced and unsatisfying.
"He can't even land an attack on her. Even I could get close," said an onlooker.
"Guess Alfred really isn't that big of a deal. Other adventurers killed loads of ragni too. Not like the spiders were hard to find…" said another.
Alfred bared his teeth and glared at the crowd. Then he pointed at Pomera, who still stood behind the Fox Fire.
"Stop cowering behind your spell! This is a duel! Fight me head-on!" he shouted.
What did he expect? Pomera was a magic user and he was a melee fighter. If the two of them dueled, this was always the kind of fight he would get. Although, perhaps his frustration was justified. Even Pomera was starting to look a little bored.
He tried to dash toward her again, but was once more warded off by the bobbing motion of the Fox Fire and took another cut from her Sylph Sword.
"This is impossible…" grumbled Alfred, his sword at the ready.
Pomera was really dialing down her magic power usage to make this look legit, but her reaction time was still incredibly fast by comparison. Even if Alfred found a way through her defense, she could let loose a counterattack, then recover while he withdrew. Alfred didn't stand a chance, but he was incapable of understanding why.
As the crowd watched Alfred frantically chase after Pomera, they started to jeer and shout insults.
"Are you saying you're used to fighting monsters, but this is your first time fighting a magic user?"
"You should've never come to the City of Magic if you can't get around a few spells!"
M-maybe Pomera should finish this quickly. It looks like they're starting to get back into it…
Alfred's face reddened and his nostrils flared.
"That's incredibly fine control of spirit magic!" I heard someone beside me say with admiration. "She's been able to maintain a sixth-level spell for quite some time, and she manages to maneuver the spell as if it were part of her own body. Spirit magic is incredibly difficult to control. Extraordinary… Her battle senses are excellent. She must have plenty of real-world fighting experience. Why, it's almost like she can predict every attack he makes, even from short-range. Even I can't do that. What horrors has she faced to acquire these skills at such a young age?"
Well, there's this Mirror, and…

I looked over and saw Pointy Hat, nodding deeply while he thought aloud to himself and admired her fighting skill. At least he didn't know her level—or I hoped he didn't.
"What are you talking about? That pompous guy is just slow," said another onlooker.
"Untrue! He's a first-rate swordsman who's refined the fundamentals to an artform. But he sees that he can't get through her defenses, so he's breaking those skills down and adding in irregular motion to avoid her attacks. That's proof that he's used to fighting other people, and I cannot find any flaws in his approach. In a straight fight, as well as in monster hunting, Alfred would most likely even beat Annihilation Rosemonde. But Saint Pomera has him outclassed…"
Pointy Hat talked at great length, but I was the only one listening. That was kind of sad, considering he was probably the only person in the crowd who had any idea what was going on.
I averted my eyes and pretended I hadn't heard.
"Sylph Sword!"
"Gah!" Alfred took a hit that sent him flying backward and rolling across the ground. He scrambled to get back to his feet and ready his sword, but Pomera had the drop on him. For a few short moments, he was completely defenseless; she could have easily finished him off with another Sylph Sword, but she chose not to.
"I-Impossible…" Alfred gripped the hilt of his sword tightly, then took a few slow breaths and released the tension from his body. "I was wrong. You are a powerful combatant."
Alfred accepted defeat much more gracefully than I expected. He must have decided it wasn't worth embarrassing himself further. Or perhaps his goal from the beginning had been to test Pomera, and the duel was just a means to that end. Maybe that childish outburst had been an act as well.
Alfred stood upright and brushed the dirt from his clothes. Pomera was staring at him, her staff at the ready. As his hostile motions ceased, she slowly lowered it and dismissed her Fox Fire.
Sera heaved a sigh of relief.
"Allow me to apologize. That was excellent use of magic," said Alfred as he sheathed his sword and walked toward Pomera, offering his hand.
The crowd began to disperse now that the two of them had managed to come to a peaceful conclusion. I hoped we'd be able to avoid any hard feelings after this.
"I-I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have gotten so angry… But I'd actually like you to apologize to Kanata, not me," said Pomera, looking down in embarrassment once she saw Alfred switch to a more mature attitude.
Alfred looked confused once he drew closer to her. "What's wrong, Saint Pomera?"
"It's just…I'm not used to shaking hands…"

Alfred's mouth turned up in a villainous grin. "No. I mean, what's wrong with you, that you would drop your guard during a fight? The duel is decided only when one of us loses consciousness or admits defeat. I have admitted nothing of the sort!"
Pomera looked bewildered.
"N-no way…" I muttered as a cold chill ran up my spine.
Alfred had complimented her skill. He'd apologized for underestimating her. He'd even sheathed his sword and offered a handshake.
He had *never* admitted defeat.
It was about as pedantic as you could get, but Alfred seemed like he was going to insist on the technicality.
"Now I've closed the gap!" he said, drawing his sword directly in front of Pomera, who was still in shock. "I would never lose to a brat like you in public! In the end, all that matters is that I have won!"
What a scumbag!
Pomera only seemed to realize what was happening as Alfred brandished his sword. But there was no way Pomera would get a spell off in time, and her Fox Fire shield had already been dismissed. This was a contest of pure melee strength.
"Ha ha ha! No matter how powerful your magic, you can't do anything once your opponent closes in! If this were a real fight, I would be the one left aliv —agh!"
Pomera let out a cute shriek and bonked him with her staff.
Alfred's sword was flung aside, and the staff followed through to smash into his face. The strike sent him flying backward through the front row of the onlookers with enough remaining momentum to leave a perfectly human-shaped hole in the side of the Guild.
The tip of Pomera's staff broke and pieces went flying everywhere. She stood wide-eyed, staring after him.
"…D-did he survive that?" I asked quietly in the silence that followed.
Pomera's level was three times that of Alfred's, but she was a magic user. With luck, one of her melee hits wouldn't kill him outright.
"Pomera wins!" said Philia, her innocent clapping the only sound echoing through the silence.

—6—

WITH THE DUEL OVER, Pomera used white magic to heal the onlookers who'd been hit when Alfred went flying.
"White Magic Level 4: Heal," she said, and a white light encased the person standing in front of her. "S-sorry."

“Oooh, I feel better than I did before I was injured! Thank you!” said the person.
“N-no… It’s my fault anyway…” Pomera’s face was incredibly conflicted every time she was thanked.
Someone had found some adhesives that we’d used to tie her staff back together, but that was just a temporary measure. Once we got our compensation for the ragni, I planned to buy her a new one.
Much to Pomera’s chagrin, the crowd was doting on her. With every comment or congratulation, her face grew gloomier, and she seemed to shrink as she pulled her shoulders in.
“She beat that blowhard like a drum!”
“What happened during the fight? I was watching, but I still have no idea what was going on. It looked like Alfred went flying after a hit from her staff.”
“Hey, didn’t you see the magic flow? It was a wind attack from one of her items!”
In the end, that was the explanation the crowd settled on. It made sense; there was no way a magic user could have bested Alfred in melee combat, and therefore, her final attack must have come from an item.
“Good job, Pomera-san,” I said.
“Pomera’s amazing! she’s so strong!” said Philia, flexing at Pomera to drive the point home. “Philia wants to fight Alfred too!”
I wanted her to give it a rest. That would have been a nightmare—I could just imagine a hand emerging from the ground the moment the duel started and squashing Alfred into the pavement. He didn’t know how lucky he was that he’d challenged someone who could show a little restraint.
“I’m sorry, Kanata,” said Pomera. “I should have listened to you and just gotten out of the situation instead of getting caught up in arguing with him.”
“I-It’s okay. I think we can work our way around this. Probably.”
Poor Pomera-san. She always seems to get caught up in other people’s drama.
Things might get dangerous for her in the future if we didn’t raise her level quickly in the Cursed Mirror. She needed to reach at least level 1,000. Alfred might have been the first jerk to take her on, but he wouldn’t be the last.
“Anyway, thanks for getting angry in my defense. I tried not to let what he said get to me. But to be honest, it made me pretty happy to see you stand up for me,” I said.
“Oh! Hee hee…” Pomera blushed as she looked up at me. “I’ll keep trying to pay you back for everything you’ve done for me.”
“In this particular area, I wouldn’t worry too much…”
Just then, I heard the sound of slow clapping coming closer. Pointy Hat guy had found us.

“Amazing, Saint Pomera! It was so cunning to hide your true fighting style. Even I was fooled until the last moment.”
Pomera gave me a confused look, and I just shrugged.
“It’s incredible to think that your high-level spirit magic and white magic aren’t your main focus,” continued Pointy Hat. “They’re simply smokescreens so you can take an enemy by surprise with your knowledge of martial arts. I should have realized it when I noticed you were so comfortable fighting at close range against a sword user. Simply fascinating!”
“…Huh?” said Pomera.
“There’s no point in feigning ignorance now. You used the momentum of Alfred’s sword swing to turn the energy of his own strike against him. You very skillfully made it seem like a crude, wide swing with your staff, but the move was so finely tuned it could have passed through the eye of a needle.”
I did my best to maintain a neutral expression. His analysis was so close, but so very far away from the truth.
“Pomera’s amazing! Pomera can do amazing things!” Philia bounced around and giggled.
Yes, but not how this guy thinks she can…
“U-uh…” Pomera started to say something, but Pointy Hat held up a hand to stop her.
“Ah, your secret is safe with me. I will report what I’ve seen to the guildmaster, but I didn’t come over to give you the third degree. This crowd won’t be able to figure out what happened during the fight. I just wanted to come over and pay my respects. Well then, I bid you good day…”
Pomera seemed like she had a lot she wanted to say, but her mouth closed tightly.
Pointy Hat grinned, turned away, and said, “Ha ha! It almost looked like pure feat of strength from a desperate and reckless attack. But that would be impossible. I have no idea how high your level would have to be for something like *that* to knock out an A-rank adventurer.”
I broke into a cold sweat, but Pointy Hat didn’t turn back.
H-how much does that guy know?
As I was starting to think we should head back into the Guild to get our compensation for the ragni, another conversation caught my ear.
“She’s good at both long- and close-range battle, and she’s first-rate when it comes to white magic… Do you think she’s as good as our S-rank adventurer, Kotone…?”
“Nah! Kotone’s in a whole different league. You’ve just never seen her go all out.”
Kotone…? Could she be from Japan too?
Her name didn’t sound like the names I usually heard in this country.
Maybe she was another traveler from a different world.
Someone like me.

I took a moment to let that settle in. It wasn't the only possibility. Lovis had an underling called Yozakura, and she'd worn a kimono and carried a katana. Lovis had said she came from another country.
My thoughts were interrupted by a voice calling from behind.
"Uh, sorry to have to ask this…but could you cast some white magic? I'll pay your normal price, of course." Sera looked apologetically at Pomera.
She was carrying Alfred, whose body was covered in blood. His eyes were rolled back into his head and he was still out cold.
"White Magic Level 4: Heal!" Pomera looked over Alfred's unconscious form with a mix of pity and disgust. "There you go. That's everything I can do. He should get plenty of rest after this…"
"Thank you! And I really am sorry for the trouble …" Sera said with a few bows of her head.
"I-It's all right…" Pomera smiled uncomfortably back.
Alfred should have apologized too, but I wondered if he would even remember what happened when he finally woke up. If he did remember, I doubted he'd ever come after Pomera again.
Come to think of it, I'll be surprised if he stays in Manaloch for much longer.

Chapter 3:
The Adventurers' Meeting

—1—

ONCE THE BUSINESS between Pomera and Alfred was done, we went back into the Guild. It seemed they had finished inspecting our bounty while the duel was going on.

"You have 107 ragno eyes, which comes to a total of 2.67 million gold. For slaying the two large ragni and providing valuable information, we have added an additional bonus of six hundred thousand. The overall sum comes to 3.27 million gold."

A jingling sack was heaved onto the counter, which I gladly accepted. It was seriously heavy! Sounds of admiration rose from the surrounding adventurers as I tried to shove it into my magic bag.

"We did it, Kanata!" Pomera was unusually giddy. The thrill of victory over Alfred and the massive payout from the ragno eyes had her flying high. "I've never seen this much money before!"

"It's got me pretty excited too," I said. With this, we should be able to buy the materials we need for the ethers.

My stomach clenched a little. This was more money than I'd ever dreamed of making at once, but I still wasn't sure if this would be enough for the research. We'd made just enough money to get by in Arroburg and it felt wrong to blow all of this on alchemy without enjoying some of the fruits of our labor.

If I was going to keep my word to Lunaère, I needed to learn to be content. The higher we flew, the farther we had to fall. And I knew that at least one person had trained their eye on us since our arrival in Manaloch.

I'd heard the name Kotone. I couldn't be certain, but it seemed likely she was a traveler from Japan like me. Unlike me, she would have received a special power from Naiarotop to prepare her for her role as a main character. Was she the black-cloaked figure who had observed us the day we came to town? The last thing I wanted was for the gods to steer us into a needless conflict.

Now wasn't the time to brood on it. I glanced at another receptionist station and saw Sera quietly accepting their compensation. Bowing to the receptionist, she pocketed the money, then turned and left quickly. She seemed like a person who did a lot of hard work and got very little thanks.

Just then, I heard shouts from the back of the Guild.

"Please, sir! You're the guildmaster! If you leave the meeting, it will wreck the agenda! We still have mountains of things to discuss! We can't take this ragno issue lightly!"

“I don’t need you to tell me that! Continue without me. My subordinates have my instructions, and they can fill in where needed.”
What was this fuss about? The guildmaster sounded like a frightening individual.
“Wh-what’s going on? Wait, I think I’ve heard that voice before,” said Pomera, confused.
From the back came a heavyset man with a strong nose and a coarse white beard. He turned his head and glared at the adventurers standing around the Guild reception counter. Even the adventurers jumped and tried to look busy to avoid a confrontation.
“It’s mister beard man.” murmured Philia, gripping my robe.
We had indeed met this man before. It was Garnet.
“So, he’s an important man at the Guild, too…”
Between managing the affairs of the Mithril Wand and the Adventurers’ Guild, he had to be an incredibly busy person—even if I didn’t think that necessitated so much shouting.
As Garnet walked, people jumped out of his way to clear a path. He was a scary person on a normal day, and he seemed to be in a darker mood than the last time we’d met. Even the toughest-looking adventurers scurried out of his way. I wondered if he had some sort of aura like Lunaère, even if he wasn’t a lich.
Garnet narrowed his eyes and scanned the hall as he walked. He seemed to be looking for something.
“K-Kanata, let’s move aside,” whispered Pomera.
“Good idea,” I said, and we shifted to the edge of the corridor.
Garnet spotted us moving almost immediately.
His severe expression vanished and was replaced with a smile as he zipped toward us. I couldn’t help looking behind me to make sure he wasn’t interested in someone else.
“Ah, so good to see you again!” Garnet stopped in front of Pomera, a huge smile on his face as he rubbed his hands in joy. “Pomera, Kanata, and little Philia! Glad to see you in the Guild. I heard of your efforts on the ragno issue and I wanted to express my personal thanks.”
As frightening as his sour disposition had been, the sudden change was scary in its own right. The other adventurers around us were looking at Garnet like he had suddenly grown a horn on his head.
“O-oh, no problem at all… W-we really just needed the money.” said Pomera, and Garnet’s eyes widened slightly.
“Oh…? Money, eh? Perhaps regarding our business at the Mithril Wand?”
H-he’s too good at guessing!
I worried that he knew too much. The pieces of the puzzle had all been there, but he put them together really fast. What else had he managed to learn about us?

Pomera's face paled and she fell silent. I wondered if she was thinking the same thing, but she just looked at me for help like a deer caught in the headlights.
"W-well… We didn't have any specific plans, but…" I said, shaking my head and forcing a smile. I had a feeling it would be dangerous to let Garnet lead us on too much. We did need to go back to the Mithril Wand, but perhaps we needed to wait a bit before we did.
Garnet leaned in and whispered, "If there's something Pomera needs, I may be able to accommodate you at a significant discount. You seemed disappointed last time, Kanata, but we have a number of items that aren't for sale to the general public."
Then he gave me a wink and touched the side of his nose.
"Do you mean…we'd be able to see those items?" I asked.
Garnet smiled and nodded.
"His beard's amazing! It's so crunchy!" said Philia as she poked Garnet's beard.
"Ph-Philia! I'm sorry Garnet-san!" I said, my eyes wide as I panicked and snatched Philia's hand away.
Garnet smiled and bent over so Philia could touch his beard more easily.
"Ho ho, is it now? I check how it feels every morning myself."
Philia giggled and played with Garnet's beard.
"H-he snared both of you so quickly…" Pomera muttered.
"Pomera, if it's all right with you, I would like to show you to the Mithril Wand right away," said Garnet. "Reception can be…stubborn. It really is best if I accompany you."
"W-we can't possibly inconvenience you. You seemed really busy just now…"
"No, no, it's perfectly all right! In fact, my schedule has just opened up."
Pomera seemed on the verge of another anxiety attack when a guild worker came running up to Garnet.
"Mr. Garnet! How little do you think of our current meeting that you'd leave to chat with some random adventurers? How can you do this during such a crisis—"
"Silence!" Garnet bared his teeth as he struck the wall with a fist, causing dust to fall from a nearby chandelier. The entire Guild fell silent again.
Garnet cleared his throat and brought a smile back to his face. "Ho ho, I apologize for my outburst."
He was a very scary man.

—2—

WE FOLLOWED Garnet over to the Mithril Wand and looked around for something that might work as a substitute adamantine ore in the elixir recipe.

I wasn't worried about the demon brains. I could get as many of those as I liked in the Cursed Mirror. And it would probably be a bit difficult to alchemically manufacture something similar to the Sap of the Spirit Tree, but we could get that by making a contract with a powerful spirit. Any powerful spirit would supposedly do the trick, and Pomera was attuned to the spirit realm.
No, the roadblock was the adamant. Given that it was valued at S-rank, we could search the entire country and not find any in a store. But now we had money, and I had a plan.
I was sure I could make adamantine ore with alchemy. Garnet seemed confident in the range of items available at the Mithril Wand, and now I just needed to find a suitable base.
Asking about the Mithril Wand's stock in a roundabout way, I browsed room after room of curated items. There were just so many, from C- and B-rank ores and metals to monster feathers and other bits. After a making a few tough decisions, I settled on what we'd need.
"Thank you very much, Garnet-san. I should be able to manage with these," I said.
"It's fairly rare that we use all these things together in our alchemy research," said Garnet looking over the pile of items that I'd stacked on a counter. "Pomera, what exactly are you trying to make? I get the impression that you're aiming for something…specific. You wouldn't be willing to let me in on the secret? I swear I won't tell anyone else. I may even be able to help."
"O-oh, it's mostly just fooling around… Uh…" said Pomera, glancing at me like she was lost. Garnet followed her gaze and looked at me. I decided to stare at the ceiling.
Garnet glared at me suspiciously. He was really, really scary.
"It's for Philia! They're going to make Philia some yummy candy!" said Philia happily.
Well, I *had* said I'd let Philia taste the Blood Ethers when I finished them.
Garnet smiled and bent over so his face was level with Philia's. "Oh, is that so? That's nice of them."
"Yeah! Philia's super excited!"
Phew! Thanks for the save, Philia.
I let out a sigh of relief, and Pomera poked me in the shoulder.
"Kanata, do we have enough money for all this?" she asked in a whisper.
"We have three million from our ragno hunt. It might be tight, but I'm sure we'll have enough." If it went over what we had, I'd just have to say sorry and come back later.
Interrupting Philia and Garnet's happy chatter, a man rushed into the room and stopped in front of Garnet. He looked winded.
"S-sir!"
"Is this really necessary? I'm busy right now, save it for later," said Garnet in annoyance.

“Are you selling the Jade Dragon’s Eye?! It took forever to negotiate that acquisition!” The man seemed distraught. I wondered if he was a researcher.
The Jade Dragon’s Eye was a B-rank crystal with a greenish-blue center. On our first tour, Garnet had said that B-rank items were normally reserved for research, but I thought it would be the best option for creating adamantine ore. I knew it wasn’t going to be cheap, but now I was worried that the sale might fall through entirely or be well beyond our budget.
“E-excuse me, Garnet-san, I think I’ll pass on the Jade Dragon’s Eye if it’s needed here…” Everything I said was immediately drowned out by Garnet’s shouts at his subordinate.
“How dare you! Don’t you think I know that? I was the one who did the negotiating. I brought the Jade Dragon’s Eye into this institution, and I’ll sell it if I think it benefits the institution to do so!”
“E-excuse me, Garnet-san, you don’t have to go that far for us…” I said, trying to stop Garnet, but he was on a roll.
“I am busy!” He leaned over the researcher imposingly. “Are your ears simply decorations, or are you too moronic to understand that simple concept? Don’t bother me again!”
“M-my apologies, sir,” said the man. He didn’t look satisfied, but he also seemed too scared to continue the argument.
Wh-what should I do? I’m not even sure I can afford it.
“Um, Garnet-san, how much is all of this together?” I asked.
Garnet placed a hand on his chin in thought. “Hmm…I would like to maintain a friendly relationship with you, so I’ll attempt to give you as large of a discount as possible. We purchased the Jade Dragon’s Eye for five million gold, and the others…”
Oof. We were over budget right out of the gate. Pomera hid her face in her hands.
Garnet smiled at our reactions but continued to tally up the cost of the items. “All together, these items come to eighteen million gold… But for you I can drop it down to ten million.”
I was stricken. That was way more than I’d thought. We’d have to hunt another three hundred ragni to get that much. I should have asked the price as I browsed, but I had been so focused on looking for what I needed that I completely forgot. My only choice was to put things back and keep the bare minimum.
“U-uh, Garnet-san…” I started, planning to apologize to him, but he leaned in close and gave me a wink.
“I know that’s steep. But if you were to consider a little request of mine, I could simply give this to you as a…token of my gratitude. What do you think?” he said.
“A…request?”
Garnet nodded solemnly. “Manaloch needs you. The Guild will soon hold an emergency meeting regarding the ragno situation. I will personally contact

each A-rank adventurer in the city and ask them to attend, but…I would very much appreciate it if the two of you attended as well. You would, of course, be free to decide whether or not to participate in the Guild's strategy after hearing what I have to say at that meeting."
All we have to do is go to a meeting? But these items cost ten million gold all together!
"We would really appreciate that, but that seems far too generous…" I knew there had to be a catch.
"I am certain that it isn't! I wouldn't have suggested it otherwise. You three were instrumental in identifying the large ragni. The date and time of the meeting haven't yet been decided, but it will probably be tomorrow."
I looked to Pomera to make sure she was amenable to the arrangement, then nodded to Garnet.
"All right. If you are really okay with those conditions, we'd be happy to accept."
Garnet beamed as he took my hand in a firm handshake. "Ah, thank you so much, Kanata, Pomera! I look forward to seeing you there!"
I felt like Garnet had us in the palm of his hand. I just hoped his intentions were honorable.

—3—

WE QUICKLY RETURNED to my room and started our alchemy experiments. I laid out the ingredients and a cauldron on the floor. With luck, the Jade Dragon Eye would soon become adamantine ore for a fraction of the price. In front of the cauldron was a curious object provided by Philia. I'd asked her for a small sample of the Sand of Dreams, and she'd decided that making it into a cutesy version of Zolophilia's mask was the way to go. For anyone who hadn't been in that fight, I imagine it would have looked whimsical, possibly even adorable. For me it was just creepy. I flipped open the Acacia Memoirs to make sure it was what I needed.

MASK OF THE RULER OF DREAMS
Value Class: Godly
A mask which can only be created by a being in total control of the Sand of Dreams and resembles the one worn by the artificial god Zolophilia. Handle with caution—the Sand of Dreams literally interprets the wishes of its owner.
The mask emits magic that assists in all types of alchemic reactions by causing a chain reaction in the material to be transmuted.
When alchemists created the God of Terror, they also prepared two of these masks. The masks have made appearances throughout history, their power inciting war whenever they surface.

For some reason, a third mask exists at present. This Mask of the Ruler of Dreams has been warped to be somewhat cuter than normal.

That was troubling. It seemed the fickleness of the Sand of Dreams was the key to its power as a catalyst. It was also interesting to note that the Acacia Memoirs recognized that this specific mask was an uncatalogued anomaly.
The book must write itself as it goes along!
I glanced at Philia, who was sprawled on the floor looking proud of herself.
“Hey, Kanata! Philia’s helping, right?” she said.
“Uh…yeah. You’re a big help. Thanks, Philia-chan.”
Once I was done using the mask, I wanted to completely get rid of it so as to ensure there were only two in the world again. Blood Ethers of the Gods were nice, but not start-a-world-war nice.
Anyway, an alchemical transmutation took three main ingredients: the thing you were changing, the catalyst to start the change, and magic power to keep the reaction going.
In our case, the Jade Dragon’s Eye was the thing we were going to change, also known as the base. I would layer in other lesser ingredients to modify that base. Then the catalyst—the Sand of Dreams, in this case—would be added to get the change started. After that, I needed large amounts of energy to keep driving the transformation until it was complete. Most alchemists used magical items for this, since their MP wasn’t sufficiently high. But in my case, I could just use my own magic power to complete the reaction.
The size of the object that could be transmuted was proportionate to the amount of magic an alchemist had at their disposal and their understanding of alchemy. In addition to its role as the catalyst, the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams could significantly boost the outcome. Even ridiculous alchemical processes that wouldn’t normally be possible could become a reality with the help of the Sand of Dreams.
“K-Kanata, do you really think this will make adamantine ore? There are only one, or maybe two, adamantine swords in the entire country,” said Pomera.
“Hmm… I wonder how much those would sell for?” I mumbled. Now that I knew the cost of a B-rank item, I was a little shell-shocked.
The Jade Dragon’s Eye was more than five million gold, and that was with a deep discount. A sword made from adamant would have to be twenty million gold or more. It was a shame that even if I could make one, I probably wouldn’t be able to sell it.
“W-well, if it were a lump large enough to make a sword, you’d probably be able to find a buyer even if you charged a hundred million gold,” said Pomera.
“That much?!” I sputtered. “But it’s just an S-rank item!”

“What do you mean ‘just an S-rank item’?!” Pomera was getting annoyed having to deal with my skewed expectations. “What do you think S-rank items are?!”
It was only that S-rank items were a dime a dozen in Cocytus. Lunaère exclusively carried Godly items. Even the parting gifts she’d given me had all pretty much been Legendary or Godly. I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that people made do with such low-level stuff, even if they were high-rank adventurers.
Come to think of it, we might have blown through a billion gold in Blood Ethers!
We were probably entering territory where it was stupid to try and express value in terms of money, but it could well have been tens of billions of gold. It was likely that the royal budget of a small kingdom wouldn’t have been able to finance my training in Cocytus. I owed Lunaère more than I could ever have comprehended.
“Kanata…there’s a weird purple smoke coming out of the cauldron. Shouldn’t you stop it?” said Pomera.
“Huh…? Aaah!” That’s what I got for daydreaming. A nasty-looking smoke was spewing from the cauldron and filling the room. It appeared the liquid around the Jade Dragon’s Eye fragment had started to evaporate and disappear.
This shouldn’t have happened so fast!
In all likelihood, the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams had accelerated the alchemical reaction faster than expected. All that energy was being shoved into the Jade Dragon’s Eye fragment and I realized now that there was no way it could stay stable.
The gem emitted a brilliant and mysterious light. I quickly pointed the Heroic Sword Gilgamesh at it.
“Barrier Magic Level 5: Force Shield!”
A ball of light wrapped around the cauldron. Within moments, the shield started vibrating and inflating from the internal pressure of the reaction. Barrier magic wasn’t my strong suit. I had a lot of practice with fire magic because I was good at it, space-time magic because it was cool and Lunaère used it a lot, and earth magic and alchemy because they had utility outside battle.
I desperately poured magic into the barrier, trying to hold it in place.
“A-are you all right, Kanata?” asked Pomera, worry apparent on her face.
“How much do you think this building would cost to rebuild?”
“Stop it! Don’t think like that!”
There was the sound of a muffled explosion and the barrier stopped deforming. I lowered my sword.
“Huh, would you look at that?”
The lump of material in the cauldron had taken on a distinct metallic-purple sheen. I took the Acacia Memoirs from my magic bag and flipped through the pages.

ADAMANTINE ORE
Value Rank: S
An ore with shining streaks of a purplish hue. Adamant is said to be the strongest naturally occurring material known to the human world. It is resistant to all types of magic.
The ore forms naturally along ley lines as metal nodes are exposed to high levels of magic over extended periods of time.

"It…it worked!"
"I-It really worked…?" Pomera peered over my shoulder at the Acacia Memoirs.
The fact that it had landed on the page for adamantine ore meant that this was the real deal, at least as far as the Memoirs were concerned.
The alchemy experiment was a success. Now all I needed was some Sap of the Spirit Tree and a few demon brains from inside the Cursed Mirror.
"Amazing! Kanata's amazing!" Philia jumped up and down, congratulating me on my success.
"Let's turn the rest of the Jade Dragon's Eye into adamant," I said.
Pomera grimaced slightly at my suggestion. "D-do that multiple times over? I could use spirit magic to cover up that sound… But can you really hold back the explosions like before? You'll be increasing the amount of the materials in the alchemical reaction…" She glanced nervously at the bent and deformed cauldron.
"We'll be more prepared this time. It should be all right."
Pomera still used Spirit Magic Level 5: Silent Singer to dampen the sound in the room, and I used the remaining Jade Dragon's Eye to make as much adamantine ore as I could. Thanks to our precautions, we were pretty sure that none of the other residents in the nearby apartments were any wiser as to what we were doing.
"Thank you, you helped a lot, Pomera-san. And Philia-chan too," I said, picking up the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams and handing it back to Philia.
"You can keep it, Kanata! It's a present from Philia!" she said cheerfully.
I looked at her as I remembered its description in the Acacia Memoirs.
"Eh…"
Was this really something I should keep? Granted, I already had quite a few Godly items in my Dimension Pocket. Any of those might start a war if they got out too.
More to the point, I was hung up on the idea that the mask was part of Philia's body. And since it was a Godly-rank item, manifesting it had to take tons of energy.
"Kanata, you're not happy? You don't need Philia's mask?" she asked with tears starting to well up in her eyes.
I stooped so my eyes were level with Philia's. "Th-thank you, Philia-chan. I just think that it will be a lot safer if you hold onto it. It's a job only you can

do. I'd like it if you let me have it again when I need it, though. Can you do that for me?"
"Yeah! Philia has it under control!" Philia gave me a thumbs up then took the mask from me. Once she put it on, it faded away.
"That cauldron is in bad shape," said Pomera in an exasperated tone. When she poked it with the butt of her staff, it creaked pitifully and a piece chipped off the rim.
For some reason the alchemical reaction always resulted in a final explosion. I had patched up the cauldron as we went along with metal I created from earth magic, but at this point it looked *really* bad.
"Are you sure we're okay? Another magic user might have sensed the magic we used," said Pomera.
"Eh, it's probably fine. I should brush up on my barrier magic just in case, though."
Even if I stretched myself, the highest I could go in barrier magic was level 8. Based on my experience so far, that was similar to an A-rank adventurer. I could dump a lot more MP into my spells, but if I had to fight someone of my level and barrier magic came into play, I'd make a pretty poor showing.
I wish I'd learned more about this from Lunaère.
"Well…it's better than nothing, I guess," I said.
"If you're not very good at it, then I'll learn barrier magic! I'm your partner. I want to be able to help you out more!" said Pomera enthusiastically, raising her bandaged staff. We needed to find her a new one.
"Thank you, Pomera-san! Once we can make the Blood Ethers of the Gods, we can start raising your level in the Cursed Mirror again. We should be able to push up the level of magic you can use at the same time."
"Yeah… The mirror…yay." Pomera grimaced.
"Do you hate it that much? I'm not going to force you, you know."
"N-no! I'll do it! I'll show you I can do it! Just leave it to me, Kanata!" said Pomera, squeezing her staff tightly.
"O-okay. Anyway… It's pretty rare for people to pick up on when someone's doing alchemy. We probably don't have to be that cautious."
There came a knock on the door. Both Pomera and I jumped and looked at one another in a panic. Philia glanced vaguely at the door, wondering if we had a visitor.
I sat frozen for a moment, and there was another knock. Pomera took a deep breath.
"I-I'll answer it," she said. "They knocked, so they probably aren't an enemy."
"No, stay there. I'll get it. It's okay, my master taught me the fundamentals of sudden magical combat."
I hadn't taught Pomera the Twin Minds Method yet. She'd be at a serious disadvantage against an unknown enemy at close range. Besides, I had the health to soak up a hit or two if I got jumped.

I gripped the hilt of the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, thinking this might be the first time in a long while that I might actually use it to its full potential. I held my weapon behind me and opened the door to find Pointy Hat guy standing there. The sight of me cracking the door with the sword held behind my back startled him. He took a step backward and immediately held up his hands.

“Whoa! Relax! I work for the guildmaster,” he said, taking another step back. “I came about the adventurers’ meeting. There wasn’t anyone in Saint Pomera’s room, so I came here.”

I let out a sigh of relief. This had to be the meeting Garnet had talked about. Come to think of it, Pointy Hat had mentioned he was connected to guildmaster before. Garnet was likely his boss.

After a moment of silence, Pointy Hat craned his neck to try and get a look behind me.

“Could I talk to Saint Pomera, maybe?” he asked.

I quickly put myself in his way to stop him. Right now, adamantine ore was laying all over the floor around a battered cauldron. I couldn’t let him see that.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.” He held his hands up again. “The guildmaster asked me not to push you too much.”

That seemed on the level. I often felt Garnet’s words had a hidden meaning, but I appreciated that he wanted to respect our privacy. In the room, Pomera covered the cauldron with a towel, then came rushing over.

“I’m sorry! What were you two talking about?” she said.

“The adventurers’ meeting is happening earlier than expected. It’ll be tonight. Well…immediately. As soon as we can get everyone in the same room. The ragno issue is really serious,” said Pointy Hat.

“T-tonight? It’s that bad?”

Pointy Hat nodded, then looked around to make sure no one was listening. “The ragni appearing around Manaloch are just a small portion of what’s out there. We’re dealing with a demon king. It’s not just Manaloch that’s in danger. The entire kingdom is at risk.”

—4—

WE LEFT PHILIA in the room while Pomera and I followed Pointy Hat to the Guild. At this point, I considered Philia to be an equal partner, but she was still passing as a child. On top of that, she was a child who had poor impulse control and a mysterious past. It wouldn’t be responsible to drag her into a meeting full of people that might figure out who she really was.

“Uh, may I ask your name?” I asked.

“Oh!” Pointy Hat nodded. “I’m Gildo, Mr. Garnet’s personal assistant. No need to introduce yourselves, ha ha!”

So, he worked directly for Garnet? He had seemed pretty interested in Pomera the first time we met. Garnet had also said he heard about us from one of his subordinates who'd returned from Arroburg. Things were starting to make more sense.
"You mentioned that you think there's a demon king lurking somewhere?" I asked.
Noble had told me about demon kings before. They were like natural disasters, except instead of being made of wind or water, they were made out of monsters. Demon kings were leaders among monsters and had the ability to enhance their minions' latent powers. On top of that, they could make themselves more powerful as their hordes grew. They had nearly limitless potential. There were also different tiers of demon king, but even the weakest could be a serious threat to a kingdom.
Lunaère had turned from a human into a lich because a demon king killed her. They were no joke.
Gildo looked around with a wary expression, making sure that no one could overhear our conversation. "Based on the trends we've seen thus far, we're almost certain. In the beginning, it was strange enough to see such a flood of a single type of monster. Now all the signs are pointing to a demon king."
"Th-that's terrifying…" said Pomera, her face pale.
That's why the Guild administrators had been in such an uproar. This was a real existential crisis.
In general, the balance of power in this world greatly favored monsters. The only reason humanity hadn't been destroyed was probably because Naiarotop and the other gods kept them hanging on by a thread for entertainment value. I gritted my teeth, disgusted by the thought.
I finally understood why Garnet had forced his way out of his meeting and tried to make contact with Pomera, despite everyone trying to stop him. He absolutely wanted the Saint of Arroburg on his side if he was facing a demon king. And then she'd demonstrated that she was powerful enough to beat Alfred, an A-rank adventurer, in a duel.
Without her help, the City of Magic risked being entirely overrun.
"Are we planning to strike against the demon king before it makes a move?" I asked, wondering if I'd encounter the S-rank adventurer at this meeting.
"If we gather enough A-rank adventurers, we might be able to do something against the demon king. But that's not what Garnet has in mind," said Gildo.
"What?"
"That's all I can say for now. I've been ordered to deal with you with utmost honesty, but I don't know how Garnet plans to break the news. I can't say any more without his approval," said Gildo, his eyes somewhat sad.
I gulped. Whatever he knew, it seemed incredibly serious.

We finally reached the Guild. Following Gildo straight in, we walked up to the second floor and into a room that normally only guild workers could

enter. In the center was a large circular table with a few adventurers already seated and waiting for the meeting to begin.
I saw Rosemonde. She was once again encased in absurd armor with her face hidden behind the metal goat mask. Since everything looked pristine, I guessed that she had a spare set at home.
Our eyes met and I bowed my head, causing her to jump slightly.
She seems pretty scared, but that's not surprising.
"Sit wherever you want," said Gildo, and I stared at the round table, lost. This felt like the lunchroom in high school, and I worried there was some unwritten rule about where people sat.
I felt a death glare from behind me.
"You're in my way. Why are you just standing here?"
I turned back and saw Alfred. His sharp, narrowed eyes held a hint of hatred.
Gildo had said they were gathering A-rank adventurers, so I shouldn't have been surprised to see him. Maybe I'd been hoping that he would leave the city immediately after he woke up from Pomera's knockout strike. His manners certainly hadn't improved.
Pomera gave Alfred a disgusted stare of her own.
"Alfred…" warned Sera. His attitude seemed to have her on edge.
He quickly gripped Sera's shoulders and her armor creaked under the pressure of his fingers.
"What? I was just asking a couple of morons blocking the door to move along. Are you saying I need to throw myself on the ground and grovel when they're in front of me just because I lost a duel?"
"That's not what I meant. I just…"
All eyes in the room were drawn by Alfred's ludicrous behavior. Alfred saw everyone looking at him, clicked his tongue in annoyance, and released Sera.
"I'm just trying to get into the room. Are all the adventurers in this city professional gawkers as well?" He seemed to be working himself into another tantrum.
I wanted to shut down any opportunity for him to give us more trouble in the future. "I'm sorry for blocking the way. Pomera-san, let's just sit over there," I said and pulled on Pomera's arm.
"I'm a persistent man," said Alfred quietly, looking at us. "Don't think you've won. Ha ha… I don't know what this meeting is about, but it's given me an opportunity. I'll make you regret embarrassing me."
I watched him from the corner of my eye as Pomera and I sat down next to each other. I'd have preferred to ignore him, but I wouldn't let him endanger us. If he insisted on clinging to this feud, I'd have to do something about him.
Rosemonde scooted away a little as I sat in the seat next to her. She drummed her fingers on the table nervously.
"Oh… Sorry. It just sort of happened," I said.

Rosemonde glanced at me, then looked around the room. She placed her hand over the mouth of her goat mask, lowered her voice, and asked, “The kid’s not here?”
“No, she’s taking a nap.”
She huffed a sigh of relief and relaxed.
That encounter with Philia must have been traumatic. I decided to ask Philia to apologize the next time they met.
“I heard about the duel, guys,” said Rosemonde. “There are some real jerks in this town.”
Rosemonde looked at Alfred. Pomera and I followed her gaze and saw that he’d been staring resentfully at Pomera the whole time. She let out a little yelp and dropped her gaze.
Alfred had called this meeting a perfect opportunity—I just hoped he wouldn’t end up sabotaging the Guild’s strategy.

—5—

OTHER ADVENTURERS started to filter in and take a seat.
“That guy in the bandages, right?” said Rosemonde in a low voice. “That’s Poison Ludger. He’s a real shady guy who’s a master of alchemy, earth magic, and water magic. He fights mostly with…poison. His name sort of gives that away, y’know.”
Poison Ludger was covered head to toe in cloth, whether it was his large blue robe or bandages anywhere that exposed skin might have showed. Even his abnormally long fingers were wrapped in strips of cloth.
“Watch your back around him, kid. People say he’s the weakest A-rank adventurer in Manaloch, but I think he’s hiding something. He’s got friends in dark places, if you know what I mean. At least Alfred will challenge you to your face.” Rosemonde quietly clucked her tongue. “I warned them not to call him to this meeting. Well…if he gives you any trouble, just be sure to fight him head-on. Don’t take your eyes off of him.”
“Thank you, I’ll watch my back,” I said.
“You two seem to be making friends,” said Pomera, looking at Rosemonde and me in disbelief.
Rosemonde shrugged, then crossed her armored arms. “You guys are weirdos, but you seem like good eggs. I probably would have been fine on my own, but when I was having trouble, you helped out. The least I can do is let you know what’s going on in town so you’re not running blind.”
It seemed her mental state had improved after coming back to the city, and her attitude along with it.
The lineup of people participating in the adventurers’ meeting was taking shape. Rosemonde gave me a quick rundown of the people already there. In attendance were the city’s lord and his underlings, the leaders of the Adventurers’ Guild, and all the A-rank adventurers.

I already knew Alfred and Rosemonde, and now I'd been made aware of Ludger. The only other adventurers in the room were an elderly man and a young woman, both magic users. Rosemonde didn't know much about them.
"Who else hasn't arrived?" I asked.
"Just waiting on Garnet and Kotone now," said Rosemonde.
I gulped. Was I going to come face-to-face with the magic user that Philia had attacked in the street a couple of days ago? I suspected that Kotone was a traveler like myself, and I honestly wanted to avoid making any sort of contact with her.
"I apologize. I called you all here so suddenly and arrived late myself," said Garnet, entering the room through a concealed side door.
Following him was a young woman. She was small and bowed to the people in the room. She seemed to be a year or two younger than myself, with pale skin and glossy black hair that barely reached her shoulders. Wearing light robes, her hands were covered by simple gauntlets that concealed the backs of her hands while leaving her fingers free. The way her bangs were cut straight across her forehead made it clear that she was maintaining her own sense of style.

In any case, she was almost certainly Japanese. I tried to be inconspicuous among the rest of the attending adventurers.
“That’s Aries’s Hand, Kotone Takanashi,” whispered Rosemonde. “She’s been laying low the past six months, but it looks like that sly fox convinced her to come.”
I wasn’t the only person on edge when Kotone entered. Apparently even A-rank adventurers were a little apprehensive about being in the room with her.
“Kotone Takanashi…” I muttered. I didn’t think I’d ever hear a name from home again.
“She’s a *traveler*, y’know—from another world. And she has one of those gift skills from the gods. She always gets the job done, but she’s wicked antisocial. Never hangs out with anybody. But she is, hands down, the most powerful person in Manaloch, so try not to get on her bad side.”
A gift skill from the gods, huh? My suspicions were confirmed.
But I wondered why she wasn’t hiding the fact that she was a traveler. Had she been forced to go public for some reason? And what skill had Naiarotop given her?
It made me wonder what kind of skill I might have been granted if I’d just kept my mouth shut.
Rosemonde was right, though. I needed to be careful around Kotone. I wanted to try and use Status Check on her, but I worried she would notice. There was no doubt that she had been granted that skill, just the same as me.
Kotone walked to an open seat with a blank, bored expression. Her bangs accentuated her aloofness and made Rosemonde’s comments about her lack of social skills seem accurate. Garnet was obviously pretty influential if he could draw someone like that back into action when she’d stopped doing adventurer work.
“Kanata…that’s not the same person that Philia attacked, is it?” whispered Pomera.
No. She wasn’t.
I’d only seen the black-robed stranger from a distance, but the length and color of their hair was completely different. That person’s hair had definitely been pale, not dark. It looked like there was at least one other high-level magic user in Manaloch.
I wracked my brain, trying to remember every detail of the person we’d encountered a few days earlier. That magic user had been a little shorter than Kotone. And their hair had gone past their shoulders…
It really was Lunaère, wasn’t it?!
But it couldn’t be. We’d cut things off so completely in Cocytus. There was no way she’d follow me after that, was there? And even if she did, I didn’t understand why she wouldn’t have talked to me.
No, our mystery stranger had to be someone other than Lunaère. I was just being biased because I missed her so much.

“What’s wrong, Kanata?” asked Pomera.
“It’s nothing.” But the scene kept playing over and over in my head. None of this made sense. “It’s nothing,” I said again, “but if we have time, I’d like to try finding someone in this city.”
“Wh-what? I mean, I’ll help if there’s something you want to do, but…” said Pomera, confused.
We were interrupted as Garnet stood. “I will now brief you on everything the Guild has learned from our investigation into the ragno issue. Without mincing words: we have come to the conclusion that the abnormal increase in ragno activity and the emergence of stronger variants is due to the appearance of a demon king.”
Everyone started talking at once, and Garnet folded his arms as if he’d expected this.
“A demon king? It can’t be true,” said the elderly magic user doubtfully.
“Surely you jest? How in the world could a demon king appear so randomly?” said Alfred, his face drained of blood. He might have been brave when challenging a C-rank white mage to a duel, but demon kings apparently scared him pretty badly.
Rosemonde plunked her elbows on the table and let out a heavy sigh. “I was thinking it might be that. Tsk, anybody leaving should probably do it before the townies catch wind.”
A guild employee let out a sudden gasp. “Wh-what are you saying, Rosemonde?!”
“Come on, my guy. I have no obligation to stick my neck out just because you say so,” she replied. “I can do whatever I want. I couldn’t care less what’s best for you.”
“Even so, this isn’t the time or place…”
“Stop.” Garnet’s deep voice silenced the room. “Rosemonde has a valid point, one that I would like to address. We will provide fair compensation for the risks you will face. All I ask for now is that you listen to my plan and my offer. If you still wish to leave after that…I won’t stop you, and I won’t blame you.”
“Sure thing, chief,” said Rosemonde with a snort of laughter.
Though I’d heard about demon kings from Noble and Lunaère, I still didn’t know much about them. But the atmosphere in the room told me plenty. Rosemonde seemed to think that we were already too late to save Manaloch. The other adventurers didn’t look hopeful either.
Kotone raised her hand, and when our eyes turned toward her, glared back in annoyance. Then she said, “Are you certain it’s a demon king? Even with the large volume of monsters, even with the more powerful versions appearing, that doesn’t mean it’s the only possibility. We don’t seem to have the evidence to back up the claim. Besides, the increase in ragno activity has been an ongoing trend for a while now. The overall progress is too slow to have been caused solely by a demon king. And no one has encountered any other abnormal phenomena.”

She rattled off the information as it were the most boring thing in the world, and she just wanted to get out of the room. Once she finished, she quickly lowered her hand with her eyes closed.
“She’s right. You’re jumping to conclusions,” agreed the old magic user, his eyes wide—like Kotone had suddenly solved the problem with a stroke of logic.
It looked like the other adventurers had a lot of faith in Kotone. I wondered how long she’d been in Manaloch.
“That would be the case if we were simply seeing a wave of the more powerful ragni,” said Garnet. “However, the locations where Pomera and Alfred killed their large ragni were very far apart. In addition, we’ve received reports of strange tracks left on the ground in another location. Those were most likely also left by large ragni.”
That meant they’d essentially confirmed the existence of the large ragni in at least three locations, each one far from the others. But what exactly did that mean?
Garnet continued, “When we encounter more powerful versions of a monster under normal circumstances, we never see them over such a wide area. And we never see multiple encounters at exactly same time. It *could* happen by sheer chance. If it were in two locations, I’d be willing to entertain the notion… But *three*? Not in three.”
Garnet took a quill, stood, and drew three X marks on a large map on the wall. “We believe that they were all spawned at the same point of origin. These three locations are where the appearances occurred.” He added five more marks. “These other locations also reported large gatherings of normal ragni.”
Then he started connecting the marks to form a large, imperfect circle.
A gasp rose from the adventurers. Even Kotone, who had claimed it was too early to assume it was a demon king, looked anxious.
Garnet traced the circle with his finger, then tapped each of the three locations where the large ragni were seen.
“It seems the ragni are appearing centered on this location. Additionally, the ragni only appear on the lower slopes of large hills,” said Garnet.
“And what’s the relevance of that?!” interrupted the elderly magic user with a pound of his fist on the table. His hope that this was something other than a demon king was running out.
Garnet replied, “At first, we only saw the occasional ragno straggler. Then they began to operate in groups. Next, large herds of ragni appeared at the same time, surrounding the city in a highly coordinated pattern. All of you know that ragni burrow through the earth.”
Garnet squeezed his hands into fists of frustration as he explained. His voice sounded like he was holding back extreme emotions, which put everyone in the room on edge. Then he forced himself to relax and continue.
“Most likely, they have built a massive underground network of tunnels. If so, the origin point will be in the center of this irregular circle. If anything,

it’s more concerning that we haven’t seen more of them! This suggests that some intelligence is keeping them under control, coercing them to work to build a tunnel network, but also to stay underground as much as possible to keep us from noticing. Mark my words—the ragni we’ve seen thus far are but a fraction of the total population. They are the overflow that can no longer be contained in the nest. In a normal situation, it would be impossible for these monsters to create such a large network and anticipate human actions. That is, it would be impossible without a demon king.”
The room fell silent again.
“The more time you give a demon king to develop, the more powerful it becomes,” said Garnet. “If we assume the demon king came into existence well before we noticed ragni on the surface, then we can also assume that we are far past the early stages. We are furthermore past the point where ten or twenty A-rank adventurers might be able to overcome the demon king if they attacked as a coordinated unit.
“Furthermore, if it is intelligent, it already knows the large ragni have been defeated and that it has been detected. Manaloch is too close to the nest. The demon king is no longer a threat to the city—it is a threat to the entire kingdom.”
The mood grew ever more somber as Garnet spoke. Rosemonde was completely silent, though I couldn’t see her expression because of her mask. Alfred had a deep furrow in his brow and his nose trembled.
“I’ve already sent word to other cities, asking if they can accept evacuees,” said Garnet. “We’ll have the townspeople take as little of their belongings as possible so that they can flee quickly, giving a wide berth to the demon king’s nest. What I wish to ask of you is that you to prepare for the demon king’s attack, bring up the rear of the evacuation, and protect our people.”
Garnet was planning to abandon Manaloch.
He was the guildmaster of this city and an executive in the largest research facility in the country. But he was willing to throw all of that away to save the people of his city. Even now, he fought a battle to control his emotions and ensure that his plan was solid.
“I won’t stop you if you wish to flee first,” said Garnet. “I do ask, however, that you don’t spread any information you learned in this meeting. Above all else, we must avoid panic. I plan to tell the people that we’re expecting a large-scale attack from the ragni, then the Guild will move forward with preparations for the evacuation. If you choose to stay and help, I ask that you return here tomorrow morning at first light. You will be compensated, and I will be happy to negotiate rates at this time.”

—6—

WHILE THE ADVENTURERS met with Garnet to plan for the city’s evacuation, Lunaère and Noble had a meeting of their own in the abandoned church.

“I was a little surprised when I saw that half-elf girl walking alongside Kanata, seeming so close. But…it appears they are just acquaintances,” said Lunaère, trying to keep her voice in her standard monotone as she nervously prattled on. The mixture of relief and apprehension was almost unbearable. “It seems that she owes Kanata some sort of debt. He’s such a kind person, so that’s not entirely unexpected. Noble, you were a fool for scaring me and getting me so worked up.”
“*I* scared *you*?” Noble stretched back in indignation.
He was teasing her a little, but he was also sure that any anxiety she felt was entirely of her own creation.
A tiny wrinkle appeared on Lunaère’s brow and she bit her thumb. She looked away from Noble, pacing uneasily back and forth in the abandoned church. “But that half-elf girl likely has some *improper* feelings toward Kanata. He’s so open-minded. The same kindness that allowed him to accept me also makes him easy to manipulate.”
“Oh, he’s definitely easy to manipulate,” muttered Noble.
Lunaère shot him a look. It was a look that halfway dared him to say something more, while at the same time begging him not to make his point. Noble settled for sticking out his tongue in annoyance.
But she knew Noble was right—Kanata *was* easily manipulated. It was how he’d managed to accomplish all of her absurd training demands. He never suspected that she’d made those impossible demands to keep him in Cocytus. Deep in her heart, Lunaère had hoped that Kanata would break down and give up. She would have used it as an excuse to let him stay.
The irony of it was that Kanata had believed that those demands must be achievable because she was the person asking him to meet them. Because of that trust, he’d forged ahead and achieved Lunaère’s artificially high expectations. It seemed impossible, but he’d successfully gained an absurd number of levels in a mind-bogglingly short time.
There probably wasn’t a single person in Locklore who was more easily manipulated than Kanata Kanbara.
“Th-then maybe that half-elf girl will manipulate him into loving her. But Kanata said… He said he cared for me.” Lunaère’s feet stopped and her shoulders slumped.
She was sure that he meant it, but the wall between the living and the dead was so thick. Even when they were physically close, they lived in separate worlds. They were destined to walk through life at difference paces. Many years from now, when Kanata was an old man, Lunaère would still be the young woman she was now.
Doubt began to creep back in.
If he realized this, would he have a change of heart? This situation was all her fault in the first place; it was only happening because she’d thrown him out. Did she have any right to criticize him for what he did once he left Cocytus?

After pacing back and forth for a while, Lunaère sat on the ground with her back to a pile of rubble and hugged her knees to her chest.
“If Kanata lived longer, I could wait until that half-elf girl died,” she mumbled, thinking to herself.
“Whoa there, Lady. Those are dangerous thoughts,” said Noble.
Her eyes opened wide as she realized what she’d just said.
Noble clicked his lid. “Besides, they’re not in love or anything right now, right? Why are you letting yourself get hung up and disappointed by something that hasn’t even happened yet?”
“You’re right, I’m being a coward.” Lunaère buried her face in her knees. “It’s been so long since I’ve worried about another person, or since I’ve walked through the human world. I’m probably just not myself.”
“You’re definitely out of your element, that’s for sure. Well, look—as of right now, things have turned out for the better. I mean, you didn’t plan to see him for twenty years and expected him to still care after all that time. That was just cruel! But now you’ve had a chance to talk with him and things look like they’re okay. You can stop worrying. By the way, how is he? What’d you guys talk about?”
“What do you mean ‘a chance to talk with him’?” asked Lunaère, confused as she stood.
“I mean, you talked to him, right?”
“No.”
“Huh?”
There was a brief moment of silence between the two.
“Wait, wait, wait! If you haven’t talked to him, how do you know what he’s feeling about this half-elf girl?” Noble demanded.
Lunaère sighed in frustration. “Who do you think I am?”
“Lady, I have no idea anymore.”
Lunaère raised an arm. “Summoning Magic Level 22: Medjedross.”
A massive magic circle appeared at Lunaère’s words, and a strange-looking spirit manifested behind her. It was draped in a white cloth covered in mystical geometric patterns that somewhat resembled eyes. Three sets of inorganic wings peeked out from below the sheet.
“Medjedross is the spirit of a majestic bird king. He sees all and remains unseen by moving through cracks in space-time,” said Lunaère.
“Kree, greee…” Something moved beneath the cloth. Everything about the spirit was unsettlingly unnatural.
Noble stared in horror.
“Sit,” said Lunaère, and Medjedross sat on the floor.
“Lie down,” she said, and it curled underneath its cloth, lowering what was seemingly its head.
“Good boy,” said Lunaère as she patted its head.
It made a noise that sounded like a pencil sharpener purring as it rubbed its head vigorously against her hand.

“Disappear for us,” she said, and it immediately vanished. Lunaère looked smugly satisfied.
“Even I can’t find Medjedross when he hides. He is both here and not here at the same time.”
“And what’s this got to do with Kanata?” asked Noble uneasily. He already knew the answer, but he had to ask. He hoped he was wrong.
Lunaère sighed. “You still don’t understand? I had Medjedross hide himself and follow Kanata, then I shared his vision.”
“You are such a stalker!” Noble stretched his tongue out and smacked the floor for emphasis. The force of the impact cracked a paving stone.
“Well, I didn’t have any other choice! When I went before, I panicked and got into a fight with that homunculus girl… Besides, Kanata must know by now that I was glaring at the half-elf girl! How can I face him after that?!”
“I dunno…normally?! Like a normal person who wants to talk to a friend?!” Noble smacked the floor again with his tongue.
“B-but I forced him to leave Cocytus… I basically abandoned him. I’d look like an idiot if I went and said I followed him because I was worried!” Lunaère’s voice rose. All pretenses of remaining calm and emotionless were gone.
“If that’s your argument, then you’re basically saying you can never talk to him again! Are you okay with that?”
“O-of course I’m not, but…” Lunaère’s voice became weak, like she was about to pass out.
“No more using that bird or whatever it is again! Go talk to him face-to-face! Be honest and tell him you came because you were worried! Then it’ll all be over!”
“Uuugh! B-but…”
“No *buts*!” shouted Noble.
Tears gathered in Lunaère’s eyes.
He’d never been this hard on her before, but unless he put his lid down, she would spend the next ten or twenty years using Medjedross to secretly stalk Kanata.
“Kree…” In the face of Noble’s rage, even the invisible spirit shrank away.

—7—

DEEP IN THE FOREST near the City of Magic was a deep, expansive underground den. From humble beginnings, it had grown significantly larger than Manaloch itself.
Ragni crowded so thickly across the subterranean walls that there were no gaps between them. A cluster of over a hundred large ragni skittered across the floor, each one nearly a match for an A-rank adventurer. Among the horde, there were even more new varieties of ragni, none of which had been seen before.

This was the seat of a growing empire.
All manner of monsters and people hung from the ceiling of the den, their bodies wrapped entirely in silk. Most of them had already died, but one person remained alive.
“H-help! Help me, please! Somebody, somebody…” the man cried out, abusing his parched throat in desperation.
“So annoying…” came a voice.
“Is someone there?! Help…” A spark of hope sprang to life as he saw a figure in the darkness. It was extinguished as he beheld her form.
Her upper half was that of a human girl, but below the waist, she was a monstrous spider. Vibrant red hair framed beautiful facial features, but a sinister light shone in her wide, sharp eyes. The fangs peeking from her mouth hinted at her cruelty.
“Please, no!” begged the man.
She smiled, seemingly enjoying his terror. Then she opened her mouth wide and bit into the man’s head. Blood poured from where his face had been, and his body fell to the ground as the silk gave way to the strength of her attack.
“Take care of this mess,” she said, and countless ragni swarmed to devoured the corpse. The sound of their chewing filled the cavern.
She calmly walked through the cave without looking back. Instead, her eyes scanned the darkness for something else.
“Mother! Mother!” she called.
“What is it, Molly, my beloved girl?” replied a voice. A corner of the wall moved in response to Molly’s call.
Another half-human, half-spider descended from above, this one nearly five times Molly’s size. Unlike Molly, her face was not beautiful.
A wide gash of a mouth carved its way across her rough-skinned face. Spread over her forehead were a multitude of unevenly sized red eyes that wriggled and glanced around the cavern. Instead of fingers, four blade-like claws on each hand scythed through the air as she landed. An enormous plum-colored gem was embedded in her chest.
This was the demon king of the ragni, the one who threatened the city of Manaloch.
“Mother, the humans have started to notice us,” said Molly as she coddled and stroked a tiny spider that rode in the palm of her hand. The miniature ragno had entered the city and searched for secrets.
Mother opened her unseemly mouth in a terrible grin. “It was only a matter of time, my child. I’ve made too many children, and I can’t possibly keep my eye on them all. Some were bound to wander up to the surface to play. Hee hee! It was only a matter of time…” Mother stroked the plum-colored stone as she spoke. “But the humans won’t have any idea how strong we’ve grown.”
“Of course, Mother,” said Molly with a wicked grin. “But we don’t need to be so cautious. I’m plenty able to destroy one silly little city all by myself.”

“Be careful now, beloved. The prophecy warned us against arrogance.”
“You worry too much, Mother. You don’t think these sad little creatures could keep up with your beloved Molly, do you?” To make her point, Molly stuck out her purplish-red tongue; on its tip was the eye of the man she had just eaten. She withdrew it and swallowed. “And my dear sisters aren’t the sort of monsters to let measly humans get the better of them. Well…I’m not so sure about Lily.”
Molly snickered.
Four abnormal ragni had been born first, and Mother called them her daughters. She loved them. First came Dory, then Mary and Molly, and finally Lily.
“I suppose there’s no need to keep hiding if they’ve noticed us. Have Lily take some ragni and destroy the city,” said Mother.
“But Mother, what about me? I really, really want to hunt the humans. I want to play with a fresh adventurer before I kill it!”
“Listen to your Mother, beloved. In every group of adventurers, there are a small number of powerful humans mixed in. Send in Lily to flush them out, and let them think that she is the most powerful among us. We shall strike once they lower their guard. Although, all the better if she can finish off things on her own.”
“I suppose. I’ll do as you say, Mother.”
“If there are humans that can defeat Lily, then it’ll be up to you and Mary. But do make sure that I don’t have to ask Dory to take a turn. She listens so poorly… A bit of a wild child.”
“Yes, Mother!” Molly smiled wickedly.

—8—

POMERA, PHILIA, AND I headed off to the Guild before the sun rose the next morning. We had decided to accept Garnet’s request to prepare for the demon king’s attack. Though I wasn’t keen on doing anything that would make me stand out, we had to protect the people as they fled.
The city was in chaos as we hurried along. The town guard and lower-ranked adventurers had been tasked with knocking on doors and spreading the order for an immediate evacuation.
“We don’t know when the monster attack will come! Please gather your valuables as quickly as possible and exit the building!”
“Th-that’s not easy to do on such short notice! Can’t Kotone handle those beasts?”
Pomera observed while we walked, a worried expression on her face. “I suppose I already knew, but this isn’t going to be easy…”
I understood how she felt. We’d been told that this situation was uniquely abnormal at the meeting last night, but the state of the city really drove that point home.

I began to wonder if we'd made the right decision. Garnet said he wouldn't blame us if we decided to run. Even high-ranked adventurers were taking a terrible risk by staying in the city even one second longer.
"I should have sent you and Philia-chan on to another city ahead of everyone first," I said.
"What are you saying, Kanata? I'm staying with you, no matter how dangerous it is!" Pomera, gripped her staff tightly. "…Besides, if Philia is in danger, then nowhere would be safe."
Pomera glanced at Philia, who struck a little victory pose and let out a small battle cry.
"Leave it to Philia! Philia will smash tons of ragni!"
Come to think of it, Philia was probably a bigger threat to the town than the demon king.
"Philia-chan…do your best, but in moderation," I said.
"Okay! Philia will do what Kanata says and will smash tons of ragni in moderation!"
I smiled uncomfortably. As I considered a better way to have this conversation, I felt someone staring at me from behind.
At first I thought it was just my mind playing tricks on me, but Philia jumped in surprise at the same time. She looked around, frightened, and I stopped walking and looked around too. No one was there.
"K-Kanata, someone was following us just now, weren't they?" said Pomera, looking back with a frown. Her elven senses must have been alerted as well.
"It was probably Alfred. I don't think he could hurt you in a fair fight, but… please be careful."
I nodded slightly.
He'd made some veiled threats last night, and I had a hard time believing he wouldn't try something in all this chaos and confusion. He might even become a hindrance while we were busy doing the dangerous work of protecting the people.
Philia stared, then her eyes opened wide in fear as they locked on one spot.
"Philia-chan?" I asked.
"It's the bad feeling. S-scary," said Philia.
"Bad feeling…?"
I remembered the stranger who had defeated Philia with one strike. Was Lunaère back?
The thought that she might be stalking me, checking to make sure I was doing okay was creepy. But…it made me kind of happy.
"A-are you there, Lunaère-san? It's you, isn't it?" I called, but there was no response.
Whoever it was had already vanished. I thought about looking, but we didn't have time for that. This wasn't a morning to be late.
"Let's go. Just keep yourselves alert," I said, giving up and moving to the front of the group. Then I saw a figure in a black robe and goat mask.

“Hey! You kids going to the Guild too? Hmph, I hate to say it, but I’ve got a good feeling about this. We shouldn’t have any problems with you three in the bag.”
“Rosemonde-san!” I said.
“Goat mask lady!” said Philia, happily approaching Rosemonde. Rosemonde took a few steps backwards and readied her metal cross-shaped staff.
“Wh-whoa there, champ! I still remember what happened last time.”
It looked like there was some lasting trauma.
“I-I’m sorry…” said Philia, a little disappointed.
“So, you’ve decided to stay in the city too, Rosemonde-san,” I said.
Considering her pessimistic view of the situation, I figured she would be the first to leave.
“That old fox said there’d be compensation,” she said with a shrug. “It’s not like I’m protecting the city either. The whole place can fall down, and it won’t be my fault. Besides, it’s wicked dumb to try and run away on your own. Strength in numbers, y’know?”
Rosemonde gazed out at the chaos in the streets. It didn’t look like things were going smoothly—citizens didn’t understand just how bad the situation really was. It seemed like we might have to buy the city more time than we’d hoped.
“I was raised in this city,” said Rosemonde, almost to herself. “My parents died when I was a kid, but my friends picked me back up. They helped me get into adventuring work and even let me join their party. Taught me everything I needed to know about being an adventurer—magic and martial arts with a staff and gauntlets. This city raised me.”
Even through the mask, she sounded wistful.
“It’s horrible, y’know? All we can do is beat feet…abandon our home. I wanted to do more to resist. Not like it would keep the place in one piece, but that’s all I can do.”
“Rosemonde-san…”
“Tsk. Okay, enough gabbin’. Time to get to work.”

—9—

WE ARRIVED IN FRONT of the Adventurers’ Guild a few minutes early, ready to hear any last minute changes to the plan or any other new information.
“Don’t get the wrong idea. If things go south…I’m out, kid. Even if that means abandoning the people,” Rosemonde shrugged.
Pomera’s mouth twisted in a frown. “But this is your hometown… Or I thought you at least wanted to help the people get away safely?”
“That doesn’t mean I intend to take a dirt nap doing it.”
I had a hard time disagreeing with her. Noble acts are all well and good, but could you really expect others to sacrifice themselves for a lost cause? Rosemonde might have been coldhearted, but at least she told the truth.

“B-but you don’t have to say it out loud!” said Pomera.
“Ha! Listen, pal, you may be skilled with magic, but you still lack experience. Here’s a tip…” said Rosemonde forcefully.
“Wh-what is it?” asked Pomera, looking mortified.
“You gotta already know in your head when to stand your ground and when to run. You won’t have time to think about it when the time comes. And if that happens, you’re going to have to decide—will you save yourself, or will you go down fighting to save someone else? That’s why you gotta decide now, kid. Or else you might do the wrong thing when the time comes and you’ll either spend the rest of your life regretting your decision, or you won’t have any life left to spend.”
Pomera’s mouth popped open in surprise, but she quickly snapped it shut and nodded.
“I understand. Thank you for the advice, Rosemonde,” said Pomera with a hint of embarrassment. I don’t think she’d expected anything that heavy. Rosemonde was more complex than either I or Pomera had given her credit for. She would fight for Manaloch, but on her own terms.
“So, uh, will the tiny terror be fighting too?” asked Rosemonde with a hint of fear in her voice.
Philia clenched her fists and let out a cry of affirmation. “Yeah! Philia will fight really hard!”
“G-good for you, champ.” Rosemonde looked away.
“Philia-chan, just make sure to only use as much power as you absolutely need,” I said.
“Yep! Just enough power to squish all the bugs! Philia promises to do what Kanata says!”
Philia hugged me around the waist and looked up at me proudly. I patted her head and noticed that Pomera had a conflicted expression on her face.
“We’ve got no choice…” I said apologetically. “If the situation is really this bad, then Philia-chan’s strength could make the difference.”
“If she does something again…do you want me to cover for her and pretend it was me?” Pomera asked.
Oof. We’d let a few people believe that Pomera had summoned the First Dragon in order to hide the fact that Philia was something other than human. That had ended up causing Pomera a lot of distress once the witnesses started telling other people.
I remembered we were in mixed company and quickly turned to look at Rosemonde.
“I have no idea what you guys are talking about, but you can leave me out of it.”
I turned back to Pomera. “Ehh…d-don’t worry, Pomera-san. I’ll cover this time…”
Avoiding attention was one thing, but if someone powerful came hunting us, I’d rather they target me instead of her. As I stroked Philia’s head, I thought

about Rosemonde's advice. What choice would I make between protecting myself and protecting people I cared about?
I owed Garnet a lot too. He was doing his best to organize a defense of the evacuation, and to make sure that the adventurers would have a fighting chance, even if they were forced into a life-or-death situation.
I was stronger than any of the A-rank adventurers. Was it really right for me to play defense like they were going to do? I wanted to keep my strength a secret, but it would be hard to do that in a situation where other people's lives were at risk and I could effortlessly turn the tide of the fight.
I looked in the direction of the city gates. I knew where the ragno leader was thanks to Garnet's map, at least in a general sense. No matter how many ragni came at me, they'd never pose a risk.
There was still something that only I could do.
I could go to their base and solve the problem from the top down.
There was surely something more dangerous than normal ragni in their nest. But after hearing Rosemonde speak of her convictions, I felt it wouldn't be right for me to keep hiding my strength and stay somewhere safe.
If I made it into their main base, I could do more than just reduce the number of their available foot soldiers. I could learn the demon king's level and see the true scale of their forces. I might even be able to challenge the demon king on the spot.
"Pomera-san, Rosemonde-san, Philia-chan, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to step down from the guard work," I said.
"K-Kanata?! Why?!" Pomera demanded in shock.
"That's weak, kid. A tough guy like you is scared of this fight?" asked Rosemonde, annoyed.
Even Philia pouted and looked like she was about to say she wasn't going to quit.
"I'm really sorry. It's just…there's something else I have to do. The evacuees are going to the city of Ploroque, right? I'll meet up with you there."
"If there's something you need to do, I'll help!" said Pomera.
I shook my head. "I have to go alone. This is sort of a spy mission. I want you and Philia-chan to make sure the defense is a success."
"…Okay. W-we'll do it. If that's what you want. Just, promise you won't do anything reckless. We have no idea how powerful the demon king is," said Pomera.
She and Philia were significantly above the average level of the other adventurers. As long as they stayed with the wagons, things would be safe on that front.
I also wanted to make sure we repaid Garnet for what we owed him, which was a lot. I didn't want people thinking we were ungrateful. This spy mission could be part of that payment…but I'd have to find a way to get the information to him without revealing any of my secrets.

Besides, Garnet was mostly interested in *Saint* Pomera. As long as she joined the defensive team, he probably wouldn't even notice that I was missing.
"I'm sorry I'm being so evasive about this. Pomera-san, Philia-chan, please be careful. You too, Rosemonde-san."
"We will. You be careful as well," said Pomera.
"Hmph… Fine, Philia will go with Pomera."
I hoped she stopped pouting before the fighting started.
"Huh. Real convenient that you get to run off on some personal business while your friends are going into danger," said Rosemonde, looking at me with contempt.
I stepped close and lowered my voice so only Pomera could hear. "Obviously be careful of the monsters, but don't forget to keep an eye out for Alfred. I know he doesn't stand a chance against you, but he might try something underhanded."
I had planned to personally give him a beating next time he picked on Pomera. He wouldn't know what hit him, but I was going to make sure that would be the last time he pulled a stunt like that. Now that we'd be traveling separately, I was a little worried he might attack when she wasn't looking.
Once, I'd thought he was a high-level adventurer who had earned the right to be a little arrogant. Now I knew he was just a scumbag.
"Yes, I know. I'll be cautious," said Pomera with a resolute nod.
I bowed to all of them again and walked away from the front of the Guild. Looking back after I'd gone a ways, I saw Pomera and the others head inside to learn their part in the plan.

Chapter 4:
The Demon King of Spiders

—1—

THE LOBBY OF THE Adventurers' Guild was a hive of activity. Pomera, Philia, and Rosemonde had to dodge around adventurers and guild workers alike. Assignments were being handed out to the lower-ranked members, telling them where to assemble and what wagons they would be guarding on the refugee caravans.

Gildo, still wearing his trademark pointed hat, met the trio and led them to the same meeting room they'd gathered in the night before. Garnet was waiting, and he looked somewhat relieved when he saw them enter.

"Ah, you've arrived! Saint Pomera, Rosemonde, and…young Miss Philia?"

"Y-yes! We'll do everything we can today!" said Pomera, bobbing her head in multiple small bows.

Without Kanata around for social support, Pomera felt her anxiety start to build. Formal situations had never been her strong point. Even though Garnet was happy to see her, she wanted to disappear.

"You don't gotta bow that much," whispered Rosemonde, studiously ignoring Garnet's greeting.

Philia moved close to stroke his beard. "It's mister beard man!"

"Ph-Philia, stop! That's rude! Mr. Garnet is a very important person!" Pomera fought the urge to flee the room with Philia in tow.

"Ho ho, no worries at all. Children will be children. You can touch this old man's beard as much as you like," said Garnet with a warm smile. Then his eyes narrowed, and he looked toward Pomera. "And where might Kanata be?"

"I-I'm sorry! The thing is…he had some sudden business to take care of. He won't be able to make it! I really am sorry!"

One of the guild workers smiled. "Don't worry. At least you're here, Saint Pomera. Thank you for your assistance."

But Garnet's shoulders sagged, showing clear disappointment. "Sudden business, eh? Is that so… In what direction was he headed? If you don't mind, I would like to send someone to find him and see if we can convince him to return. I understand that things do come up, but still…"

"U-uh, well… I don't actually really know where he went," said Pomera.

Garnet raised his face and looked into Pomera's eyes, searching for any tell that she might be lying. The pressure was too much, and she dropped her gaze.

"I see. I suppose there's nothing we can do," said Garnet, disappointed.

"I-I really am sorry…" Pomera couldn't stop herself apologizing again.

Rosemonde tapped Pomera on the shoulder with an overly armored hand and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Hey, kid. I know your boyfriend’s pretty stubborn about hiding his strength, but is there a chance he talked to the old fox about it? The guildmaster seems kind of hung up on Kanata.”
“N-no, I don’t think he’s said anything.” It was odd. Even though she couldn’t recall Kanata revealing any hint of his actual power to Garnet, the old man seemed distraught that he wasn’t going to participate in the defense operation.
With Garnet lost in his own thoughts, the trio went to sit at the circular table. Since Philia hadn’t actually been invited, Pomera was concerned that there might not be enough chairs for the rest of the adventurers who would soon arrive. She pulled Philia into her lap.
Rosemonde sat in the seat next to Pomera, her arms crossed as she brooded. She glanced over at Philia every once in a while and shuffled uncomfortably in her chair.
Yesterday at the adventurers’ meeting, Rosemonde and Kanata had seemed to be hitting it off pretty well. But this morning, neither she nor Pomera seemed inclined to start a conversation in his absence. Pomera wasn’t the chattiest person in the best of times. And the few times they had talked, she had ended up arguing with the armored adventurer. Rosemonde didn’t seem interested in talking either, so they both sat and stewed in the awkward silence.
Unable to stand it anymore, Pomera steadied her breathing and tried to make small talk.
“It looks like most of the people from last night’s meeting are here today,” said Pomera.
“Hmm? Is that some kind of jab about me thinking about sitting this one out?” Rosemonde’s goat mask tilted to the side quizzically.
“N-no! Th-that’s not—I didn’t mean that!” Pomera shook her head side to side.
Rosemonde let out a snort of laughter and looked around the meeting room. “I don’t see Aries’s Hand Kotone, though.”
“That’s the S-rank adventurer, right?” asked Pomera as she looked for Kotone’s face among the gathered adventurers.
“She probably didn’t feel like coming. She’s plenty strong…and a bit creepy. But I never have any clue what she’s thinking. If she’s not here, it means this job just got a lot more dangerous,” Rosemonde said quietly so only Pomera could hear.
Pomera gulped and looked at Garnet. He seemed stricken, and he motioned to his subordinate loitering near the door.
Pomera glanced at the clock on the wall; it was already past the time they were supposed to meet.
“Sir, we can’t wait any longer…”
“Hmph. I suppose not. Gildo, go look for Kotone. And then see if you can find Kanata.”

As Pomera watched them talk, she saw the door to the meeting room open slowly.
The glossy black hair and straight bangs were unmistakable. Cold, emotionless eyes passed over those in the meeting room. Kotone Takanashi had arrived.
“K-Kotone, you’re here!” said Garnet as he jumped up to greet her at the door the moment he saw her walk in.
Kotone checked the state of things in the meeting room then turned her gaze back to Garnet. “You haven’t started yet?”
“We were just waiting on you. Did you have some last-minute business to take care of?”
“No, I just overslept a bit. Sorry I’m late.”
“Ah. I must apologize for keeping you so late last night, followed by an early morning. In any case, I greatly appreciate your assistance with the evacuation.” Garnet didn’t show any sign of worry or annoyance.
“He changes really quickly,” said Pomera with admiration.
Rosemonde peered at Garnet and muttered, “That sly old fox knows when to use fire and when to use honey.”
Kotone headed toward an open seat but stopped halfway. Her eyes met Pomera’s, and the white mage jumped. Kotone changed direction and stood over her.
“N-nice to meet you, um, Kotone. Do you need something from me?” asked Pomera.
“Where’s the man who was with you yesterday?” Kotone asked curtly.
“H-he had some business today…uh…”
“I see. Where is he from?”
“W-well, to be honest, he’s never seemed to want to talk about it.”
“Do you know his family name?”
“I-I’m not sure that’s something I should go around telling people!” Pomera stammered, and Kotone’s eyebrow moved slightly. Rosemonde was right; Kotone was creepy.
“You don’t even know his name? Is there something shady he’s trying to hide?” asked Kotone.
“N-no. Kanata said his family name is Kanbara… Wh-why do you ask?” asked Pomera.
“Just curious.” With a last appraising look at Pomera, she turned to find a seat while murmuring Kanata’s name to herself. “Kanata Kanbara… Sounds real. I don’t think he’s from that fake-Japan. Yamato Kingdom or whatever it’s called…”
For a moment, Pomera thought she saw a hint of a smile play across Kotone’s face.
Pomera relaxed her tense shoulders as the S-rank adventurer finally sat down and ignored her. “Wh-what was that about…?”
“She’s up to something,” muttered Rosemonde. “There’s no way she just overslept.”

“Is she dangerous?” asked Pomera.
Behind her mask, Rosemonde was silent for a moment. “There’s never been any stories about her causing problems, and she’s considered a local hero for her track record defending the city from monsters. But she puts me off. I can’t tell what she’s thinking, but I know she’s up to something. It’s probably a bad thing if she’s got her eye on you.”
Pomera glanced discreetly at Kotone, but quickly looked away as Kotone’s eyes started to look back in her direction.
Garnet took his place at the front of the room, and it seemed that he was ready to lay out his plan now that Kotone had arrived.
“Pomera.” Philia was staring at her intensely. “Philia is going to work so hard!”
“Ph-Philia…that’s good, but please try to keep calm.” She suddenly remembered what Kanata had said before they separated. He’d said that this time, he’d take responsibility and cover for Philia if she caused a scene.
“…Ah? But Kanata isn’t here now. Looks like it’s my job again.”
The blood drained from her face as she wondered what it would be this time. Another dragon? The Creepy Ball?!
“This is most likely everyone,” said Garnet, standing in the middle of the room. “Right. Let’s go over the new information we received overnight, as well as our action plan for today.”
Something was missing.
“W-wait… That’s weird…” Pomera said, looking at the adventurers in the meeting room.
Not something…*someone.* A certain blond A-rank adventurer wasn’t there.
Pomera was so nervous and caught up in the situation that she’d forgotten to be on guard against Alfred.
She and Kanata had been certain that he would make a move during the evacuation operation. But it was more worrying that he wasn’t here. That meant she had no idea what he was doing.
“What’s wrong, kid? You seem worried,” said Rosemonde.
“W-well, I don’t see Alfred… He was at the meeting last night though,” said Pomera. Rosemonde snorted a laugh.
“He’s long gone by now, kid.”
“Huh…?” Pomera’s eyes opened wide. “N-no, I don’t think that’s the case…”
“He looked like a ghost after the meeting last night. I saw him grab his lady’s arm and move with a quickness. He even shouted something like ‘Someone like me can’t die in a place like this.’ I bet he nearly wet himself when he heard Garnet say there was a demon king.”
“Oh…”
“I’m pretty sure if you looked up ‘drama’ in the dictionary, you’d find a picture of Alfred. The only thing strong about him is his vanity. Good riddance.”
“O-okay… Thank you for letting me know,” said Pomera. But she wasn’t totally convinced.

—2—

LUNAÈRE GRABBED HER dark Impurity Sealing Robe by the hem and pulled it off before running her fingers through her silky hair and letting out a small sigh.

“Noble, I’m back,” she called. From the shadows, the jewel-encrusted treasure chest bounced into a beam of morning light coming through a window.

“Well?” Noble looked up at her with doubt.

Lunaère turned to face him, then closed her eyes and silently gave him a small nod. “This time…there was nothing I could do.”

“Seriously?!” He snapped his lid angrily.

“D-don’t look at me like that! It’s not my fault ! I really was planning on talking to him this time. I swear, I was just there…”

“Then what was with the whole dramatic entrance?! Fine, I get it! You have no real intention of talking to him!” grumbled Noble.

“Oh, by the way, I bought you a souvenir. Some sort of local pastry. You can eat them.”

Lunaère placed a small, cute pouch emblazoned with the words *Manaloch Groundnut Pies* on a nearby table. Small groundnuts were unearthed, shucked, then smashed into a butter before being sweetened and spread between two cookies.

They were a favorite of young ladies in the city, since they were both cute and sweet. Even so, they were high in protein and several adventurers had secretly acquired a taste for them. When they thought no one else was watching, they bought the pastries and stashed them away in their magic bags.

“Don’t try and butter me up, Lady! When are you going to talk to him so we can stop hiding in this dump?” said Noble.

“Y-you don’t understand! It was really just bad luck!”

Noble heaved a deep sigh. “All right, I’m listening…”

“Good, you’ll understand it’s not my fault.”

Noble waggled his lid noncommittally and wondered what her excuse would be this time.

It wasn’t like she was an idiot. She was a lich…a *high-class* lich, in his opinion. In theory, she could live forever, and there wasn’t any knowledge that she didn’t know or couldn’t find out. Even if love was a new experience for her, it couldn’t possibly take her this long to wrap her head around it. He got the feeling that she was being willfully dense.

Noble felt he’d said everything to her that he could at this point. He’d begged and shouted, pleaded and demanded, teased and consoled. Now it was up to her to figure out a solution for herself.

“Kanata seemed really busy. I didn’t want to distract him.”

“Oh! Well sure, that seems reasonable.” Noble said, and Lunaère beamed because he understood her predicament. “Now we can head back to Cocytus.”
“That’s not what I mean. You’re making me angry, Noble.” Lunaère glared at the mimic.
“No! I’m the one getting angry! This trip is going nowhere. All you do is make assumptions and then get upset and then don’t do anything. I could believe you were going to try talking to him the first time, and maybe even the second. But after the third, and the—”
“S-stop saying it like that! I didn’t have a choice. It’s just—”
“Pah! More excuses!”
“I’m trying to tell you my reasons. Don’t make fun of me. It wasn’t the kind of situation where I could just casually walk up to him and start talking. There were…obstacles. Don’t talk to me like you know what I’m going through! You act like it’s easy, but you’re not the person who has to do it.”
“Fine, then I *will* do it.”
“Huh?!”
“I’ll go talk to Kanata,” said Noble with a tilt of his lid.
“Uh…”
He began to hop his way out of the church. Lunaère stood there with a shocked look on her face, bewildered by this sudden turn of events.
“I’ll get it all straightened out,” said Noble. “I’ll say, ‘Kanata, Lunaère couldn’t resist her love for you and came to find you. But once she got here, she chickened out and started throwing tantrums. She’s annoying me to death, so can you come do something about her?’”
“Gravity Bomb!”
Lunaère pointed her finger at the exit. It was encompassed in shining darkness for a moment before the light from outside, the door frame, and all the physical space around it collapsed into the center of the spell. Then the singularity exploded.
The walls broke and pillars crumbled. Slowly, cracks spread across the stones of the abandoned church, and it began to collapse from the abuse.
“Argh, Lunaaaaaaaaère!” screamed Noble.
“Space-time Magic Level 22: Object Memory.”
A blue light rushed through the area and the falling stones stopped in midair. They reversed, lifted up, and reassembled themselves into walls and ceilings as time flowed backwards. The stains on the walls disappeared, and a fresh coat of paint spread across every surface.
“I may have gone back a bit too far…” Lunaère’s breathing was heavy as she wiped her brow. Lost in thought about her greater predicament, Lunaère had let the spell run to completion. “Don’t you dare tell Kanata any of that, Noble. I promise that if you do, I will never forgive you for all of eternity.”
“I was bluffing and you know it. I couldn’t even walk down the street without causing a riot.”

“It’s your fault for joking around. And…don’t embarrass me in front of Kanata. He respects me. I’d never be able to face him again,” said Lunaère, a few tears flowing from her downcast and gloomy eyes.
“Maybe, maybe not. Listen, you’re trying too hard to look good. You want him to think you’re cool, to see you in good light…and that image is making it impossible to talk to him like a friend. He already likes you for who you are.”
Noble bounced farther into the church, giving the teasing a rest to avoid another close call with a Gravity Bomb. It was possible that he had enough HP to take a direct hit, but he didn’t really want to find out.
He sighed. “All right, go on. Go try again.”
“Huh? B-but…”
“Kanata can’t be busy twenty-four hours a day.”
“I think he’s left the city. I should probably wait for things to settle down…”
“Nope. No more excuses. You’ll lose your chance to see him if you keep putting it off!”
“Y-you don’t have to tell me! It’s ju—uh, umm…” Lunaère realized that “it’s just” was a lead in for another excuse, but she couldn’t help herself. “Well, it’s obvious it would be better to leave it for later, in this one case!”
“Gimme a break! There’ll never be a perfect opportunity, no matter how long you wait! What’s the next excuse? The weather? Your health? If you keep looking for a reason to avoid him, you’re always going to find one.”
“I-I guess, but…”
“Was it that girl, Pomera? They might not be an item now, but at the rate you’re going, it’s going to happen sooner or later”
“W-weren’t you the one who told me not to worry about that girl any more than I needed to?”
“Well, no one else would have told you that—I’m the only person you talk to these days! Tick tock, Lady. Kanata might be oblivious to her charms now, but he’s not going to stay that way forever.”
Lunaère stared in stunned silence.
“Eh, not like it would make a difference. You still wouldn’t talk to him even if Pomera started making moves.” Noble turned his back to Lunaère and let out a heavy sigh. Maybe this would be the thing that finally got Lunaère into action.
But after waiting a while, she made no reply. Noble glanced back at Lunaère.
“Kanata is all I have. Why would she do something that cruel?” asked Lunaère. A drop of fresh blood dripped from where she was biting her knuckle.
“No, that’s not what I meant…”
Lunaère walked unsteadily toward the exit of the church. “I’ll find him.”
“Lunaère, don’t do anything crazy.”
Lunaère didn’t turn back; she didn’t even nod. She just kept walking out of the church.

“Sorry, Pomera,” Noble sighed. “You seemed nice enough, even though I never got a chance to meet you.”
He stared at the door for a while. Then, now bored, he noticed the small pouch on the table. He snatched it up with his tongue before swallowing the groundnut pies, pouch and all.
“Oh wow, these *are* delicious. Wonder if she’ll buy me some more?”

—3—

POMERA AND THE OTHER A-rank adventurers relocated to the city gates where the wagons were assembling to carry the citizens to safety.
The refugees were headed for the merchant city of Ploroque. Sixty years ago, it had been an impoverished slum-town. Then the city caught the eye of a young visiting merchant by the name of Grede. He knew that location was everything and Ploroque was an ideal spot for a trading hub. He financed monster hunting in the area to improve local safety and built up a merchant association. Now it was one of the richest cities in the kingdom.
Ploroque was also the ideal point from which to make a stand against the demon king. Grede maintained a large armory for equipping the adventurers and personal guards he had at his disposal. Because the city flourished as a center of trade, he could also easily call on other settlements for support if things took a turn for the worst.
“If you ask me,” said Rosemonde, “Grede’s a pretty shady guy. He’s not someone I’d want to share an ale with.”
Rosemonde had opted to team up with Pomera, and her previous stoicism had faded away. Now she was chatting Pomera’s ears off while the white mage struggled to carry a napping Philia on her back.
“You think so?” Pomera asked. “Based on what Garnet said, Grede sounds like a hero.”
“Grede likes people to think he did Ploroque a good turn, but he made out like a bandit and he’s above the law. There’s a rumor that he hired some alchemists to work on homunculus experiments, and it got some people killed. He hushed it up with money and threats. I mean, the guy made a mint in one generation. He’s gotta be hiding something,” said Rosemonde with a nasally laugh of contempt.
Pomera couldn’t decide who she disliked more, silent Rosemonde or talking Rosemonde.
“So, uh…what’re you guys planning on doing?” asked Rosemonde. “I don’t feel like I have any debt to Manaloch once we get the caravan to Ploroque. I’m sure as hell not going to go fight a demon king just for the glory. I’m not going to let Grede run me around either.”
“I’m not sure… I’d have to talk to Kanata and have a think about it. I don’t know what he wants to do.”

Pomera missed him already. Kanata had said he was going on a kind of spy mission, and Pomera thought she knew what that meant—he was headed to the center of the ragno nest to try and gather more information. While Pomera wasn't sure what answers he would find, he seemed pretty optimistic about fighting the demon king. She imagined that Kanata would choose to stay in Ploroque and accept Grede's mission to destroy the monster.

Rosemonde took a long, hard look at the final caravan assembling in front of the town gate. "This show's running late. Looks like there's a bunch of folks getting their panties in a bunch because they don't want to leave. Hey kid, go find someone in charge and ask how it's going."

"Wh-who, me?" asked Pomera.

"Do you see anyone else here? I don't like talking to the lord's flunkies and they don't like talking to me. We've had our…*problems.*"

"Okay… Would you mind holding Philia while I go?"

Rosemonde jumped.

"Rosemonde…?"

"Y-you know what, it's fine. If they have any important information, they'll come find us. No news is good news, right? Rushing them won't gain us anything."

"Are you afraid of Philia?" Pomera worried there was some lingering trauma here.

"I am not! Are you jerkin' my chain, kid?!" snapped Rosemonde.

"S-sorry! I wasn't trying to make fun of you…"

Just then, Philia's eyes popped opened and Rosemonde let out a yelp of surprise.

"Pomera, what's wrong? Are the spiders here?" Philia sleepily rubbed her eyes with her arm.

"Urgh!" Rosemonde took a step back from Philia, who looked up at the sorcerer in confusion.

There were a few seconds of silence before Pomera narrowed her eyes at Rosemonde.

"Wh-what? You got a problem?" asked Rosemonde.

"I didn't say anything…"

Just then, mounds started to appear on the ground around them. First dozens, then hundreds of tiny hills rose from the earth as the nearby civilians began to panic.

"Earth Magic Level 5: Clod Bomb!" Rosemonde raised her staff and created a magic circle.

A red sphere of light appeared, peeling dirt from the ground and pulling it onto the sphere's surface. Moments later, a perfect ball of dirt hovered in front of the sorcerer.

"First strike wins the fight!" shouted Rosemonde as she swung her staff down. The sphere dropped and expanded slightly as it made contact with

the ground, then exploded. The mounds were swept clear by the blast and the emerging ragni caught in the explosion were flung upwards.
“I knew it was those bastards! Demon king or not, they’re coming heavy for the civilians. It’s gonna be a scrap, kid!”
The townspeople turned to flee back into the city as more ragni surfaced. So far, it was mostly the common type, but a few of the larger variant were beginning to surface as well.
“Dammit, this is why I didn’t want to stay.” Rosemonde sighed and readied another spell. “Fine. Let’s give them a fight, guys!”
“A-all right!” said Pomera, readying her staff.
The area was flooded by ragni in a matter of moments, and humans fell into one of three groups: those who ran, those who hid, and those who stood to face the monsters.
“H-how did they know we’d be here?!” cried a man as he ran, a ragno chasing after him.
Rosemonde rushed to intercept, using the butt of her staff to skewer the spider. Bodily fluids erupted as its legs spasmed, then it stopped moving. Rosemonde looked at the running man from the corner of her eye and let out a snort of laughter.
“Ha! Maybe this will light a fire under the idiots who are still dragging their feet.”
Normally, even a single monster who strayed too close to the city would cause an uproar, but a horde of monsters would never make their way into the city without the influence of a demon king. Anyone still in denial about the situation was about to get a rude awakening.
“Philia wants to help too! Philia will protect the city and get *all* the compliments!” The girl energetically extended her arms and prepared to summon…something.
Pomera panicked and tried to push them back down. “W-wait! Philia, you’ve got to stay calm. It’d really help if you behaved yourself while in front of other people.”
On one hand, Philia was very possibly able to save the day single-handedly. On the other hand she was just as likely to destroy the ragni and the city at the same time. Either way, Pomera would have to take the credit or the blame. Pomera wasn’t sure which eventuality she feared more.
“B-but Philia wants to protect the city too! Philia wants to work really hard and tell Kanata about all the amazing things Philia did…” Her whine turned into a pout and her shoulders slumped.
“Ph-Philia, it’s just…” Pomera thought fast. “Well, it’s because you’re our secret weapon.”
“Philia’s a secret weapon? Cool!” Her eyes sparkled and Pomera breathed a sigh of relief.
“E-exactly. So, I’d like you to wait until the enemy gets the upper hand before you help us, okay?”

“Okay!” Philia nodded vigorously and gave a thumbs up. Then she began to search for any sign that the ragni might be about to overwhelm the defending adventurers.
With a worried expression, Pomera reminded herself that she needed to do her best to make sure that Philia didn’t find what she was looking for. Who knew what the Sand of Dreams might manifest to deal with the ragno threat?
“Earth Magic Level 5: Clod Bomb!” Rosemonde raised her staff and another sphere of dirt exploded, blowing away eight ragni at once.
“Hah! These donkeys are scuttling so close together it’s easy to get multi-kills, kid! This is a nice change of pace!” Rosemonde closed in on a ragno flipped over by the blast and whacked it with her staff to finish it off.
The other adventurers nearby were evaluating Rosemonde’s performance. Rosemonde looked back at them and let out a happy bark of laughter.
“Sh-she’s reckless…” said one of the spectators.
“That’s Annihilation Rosemonde for you. She’s one of a kind, and her fighting style lets her take on multiple enemies at once.”
“How ’bout that, girly?” Rosemond jeered at Pomera. “You’re not bad at magic, but I can take on more—”
“Fire Magic Level 7: Fireflies!” Pomera raised her bandaged staff and a magic circle appeared. Dozens of balls of fire flew through the sky like they had a mind of their own, headed straight for a cluster of nearby ragni. The explosive impact incinerated dozens of the monsters.
Cries of astonishment filled the area and Pomera hunched her shoulders bashfully.
“Wh-what was that spell?! She independently controlled multiple fire missiles!” exclaimed one of the other adventurers.
“She’s completely mastered that seventh level spell! And it doesn’t seem to have drained any of her magic. I heard she defeated an A-rank adventurer, but I didn’t think she’d be *that* powerful…” said another.
“But I’m… I’m supposed to be the one who…” Rosemonde said, her staff lowering as she slumped. She looked at Pomera and grumbled something quietly.
“What’s wrong, Rosemonde?” asked Pomera.
“Even without your boyfriend, you guys make me look like a chump,” said Rosemonde, her shoulders falling ever lower.
“R-Rosemonde?”
The sorcerer snapped out of her depression quickly as a new wave of ragni surfaced. Pomera took Philia’s hand and headed toward a particularly thorny skirmish, firing off spells and reducing the ragno numbers as they went. Rosemonde seemed to get her competitive spirit back and followed along, trying to match Pomera’s kill rate.
The ragni continued to burst forth from the ground, but their numbers began to dwindle with each new wave.

“Whew, looks like we’re down to the clean-up,” said Rosemonde, her breathing heavy as she thrust her staff into the ground and used it to lean on. The area-of-effect spells had sapped her magic power and left her exhausted.
“Fireflies!” Pomera was still casting with no sign of fatigue.
“Don’t you think…there’s something weird about the amount of magic you have…?” Rosemonde eyed Pomera with suspicion.
Pomera was about to reply when she realized Philia was nowhere in sight.
“A-ah! Where did she go?!”
“The kid wandered off when you were focused on fighting the bugs. I wouldn’t worry about it. She’s probably tougher than you and me put together.”
Pomera facepalmed. “It’s not Philia I’m worried about. I’m worried about everything else *but* Philia.” What on earth was the little girl doing while unsupervised?
Pomera had no idea what Philia might get up to if she wasn’t properly minded. Actually, Pomera knew that Philia was fully capable of doing something totally unexpected even when she *was* being watched, and Pomera couldn’t do anything to stop her.
“I-I see… Listen, I’m sure she can take care of herself for a few minutes,” Rosemonde assured her. “We’ll find the kid, but we gotta keep moving and hunting these ragni.”
“You’re right… We haven’t been in that direction. Do you think everything’s under control over there?” asked Pomera, looking at a fenced-off area near some buildings.
“Don’t worry. Kotone is stationed over there.”
When they looked again, they saw Aries’s Hand Kotone standing on the roof of one of the buildings as ragni swarmed up the walls to attack. It looked like the monsters recognized that Kotone was the biggest threat in the area and concentrated their numbers in a desperate attempt to overwhelm her. The S-rank adventurer readied a bow and volleyed a series of arrows at the approaching spiders with incredible speed.
“She can use any weapon like it’s a part of her own body. No matter how much power it takes to wield, no matter if it’s cursed. Normally, you can’t even lift a weapon above your level. That’s not the case with her,” explained Rosemonde.
The building was swallowed by the throng of ragni and Kotone leapt high into the air.
“Space-time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket.”
Her bow was surrounded in light and disappeared. In its place, Kotone grasped a massive axe forged of a blue metal and engraved with magic runes.
“Ancient Axe of the Giant,” shouted Kotone.
Easily five times longer than Kotone was tall, the weapon looked absurd compared to her small frame. Regardless, she swung it in a clean arc before

it cleaved deep into the roof of the building. Cracks ran through the structure and it collapsed swiftly, burying the ragni alive.
“Y-yeah, she’s probably okay over there…” said Pomera with a gulp.
The axe remained lodged in the mountain of rubble and Kotone dropped to stand on the upturned handle, staring at the area around her with a bored expression. Something about her eyes seemed sleepy, but then she blinked in surprise and looked toward the top of the city wall.
Pomera followed her gaze. Standing atop the battlement was a pink-haired girl with pigtails on either side of her head. She was adorable, except the lower half of her body was a spider’s abdomen, complete with eight scythe-like legs.
There was no way she was unrelated to the ragno attack.

—4—

“TH-THAT’S NEW...” said Rosemonde as she leveled her cross-shaped staff at the girl.
Other adventurers started noticing the half-spider girl as well.
“Hey, there’s something standing on top of the city walls!”
“What is that thing?!”
“I’m, I’m, I’m the youngest of Momma’s four daughters. My, my, my name is…Lily.”
She bowed her head over and over in an almost subservient manner to those gathered before her. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, moving independently as they darted between the adventurers below. The creature’s mouth hung slightly open and oozed saliva across a set of wicked reddish-purple fangs.
“Momma told me to come and, and, and eat you all up. If I fail, my, my, my big sis Molly will make fun of me, so, so, so please don’t resist while I eat you. Thank you!”
Lily opened her mouth wide, disgorging blood, drool, and a number of severed fingers—it looked like she’d already made a snack of a number of people on her way to the fight.
The adventurers recoiled in fear as Lily leapt from the rampart with a cackle. Dancing through the air with irregular movements as she closed in on her prey, Lily descended on thin silk threads attached to nearby buildings.
“Hee hee hee hee hee!”
The hapless adventurers were unprepared for her landing, and they fell as she struck out with her razor-sharp forelimbs. Chunks of flesh were carved cleanly from their bodies. Arms and legs scattered about in a shower of blood.
“Humans, humans… Ahh, so weak, weak.”

Lily lifted a dismembered arm, raised it above her head, and lapped at it. Several drops landed on her cheek, and she used her unnaturally long tongue to sweep them into her mouth. Then she smiled ecstatically.
Screams rang out across the battlefield as the townspeople realized that the tide of the fight was turning against them.
Kotone moved without hesitation and swung the Ancient Axe of the Giant. Her attack was in vain. Leaping into the air with an unnatural motion, Lily climbed her threads to dodge the strike. Then she released her hold and fell through the air to balance on the tip of Kotone's axe.
"The, the, the only nice thing here is this weapon, weapon, weapon." She looked down with a smile of contempt. "Ah, humans, so pathetic."
Kotone let go and sprinted backward to put space between her and the axe.
"Space-time Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket." Kotone's arms glowed and a pair of large golden gauntlets appeared around them. "Elder Dragon's Claws."
Lily kicked the massive axe away and rushed at Kotone. Her fingers stretched to show their wicked reddish-purple claws, and she swiped violently with both arms. Kotone barely managed to fend off the attacks and was forced to fall back. Lily struck again and again, and though Kotone could parry the deadly swipes, she couldn't find any opening to counterattack.
"Y-you're kidding me. I can't believe that thing can survive a tangle with Kotone," Rosemonde said, shocked. "Maybe it's even better—"
"H-hurry up, Rosemonde!" called Pomera, and Rosemonde jumped.
"Huh?! You got a death wish, kid? Not even an S-rank adventurer can stand up to that monster! Besides, I'm almost out of magic already!"
Pomera didn't listen. She'd already dashed off toward Kotone.
Staring at Pomera's back, Rosemonde shook her head and chased after the white mage. "Bring it on, then! We'll show that freak what Manaloch adventurers are made of!"
While Lily kept Kotone's attention with a flurry of claw attacks, she used her front leg to trip the adventurer.
"Ah!" Instead of falling, Kotone leapt back to correct her footing. Lily slashed out at the fighter's stomach, almost like she'd anticipated Kotone's move.
"I'm not going to make it that easy," said Kotone as she twisted in air to evade, then delivered a sharp kick to Lily's face.
"Agh!" Lily pressed a hand to her face and fell back.
Kotone advanced and landed a gauntlet-clad karate chop in Lily's midriff. Blood spurted into the air.
"O-ow, so, so, so mean! You're just a human! How could you, you, you hurt…*me*!"
Unfortunately, the hit was just a superficial wound. Even multiple attacks of that caliber that wouldn't be enough to take down Lily.

The demi-spider leapt backward and the Ancient Axe of the Giant started to move of its own accord. Its handle was covered in fine silken threads and Lily pulled the strings. Slicing through the ground, it headed straight for Kotone.
The fraction of a second Kotone needed to grasp what was going on meant that she lost any chance to dodge. Instead, she crossed her gauntleted arms in front of her and parried the axe's strike, but the blow flung her back. She crashed to the ground and was sent rolling.
"This, this, this axe…is kind of nice. I think I'll keep it," said Lily happily, narrowing her uncoordinated eyes in a smile.
"Spirit Magic Level 8: Laelaps's Fang!" Pomera said, pointing her staff at Lily.
A magic circle appeared and a bolt of lightning shaped like a beast rushed forth. Laelaps charged straight at Lily, carving up the ground as it did. Lily leapt into the air and the beast passed cleanly below her feet.
"Impossible…" Pomera stared in disbelief. Fast and powerful, Laelaps's Fang was the strongest spell she had at her disposal. It *never* missed. After beating Alfred, she'd begun to think she might never encounter an opponent more powerful than herself. But now it looked like Kanata had been right to worry about her level.
"What was that, that, that?" asked Lily with a sneer. "There's no way a straightforward attack like that would hit at this distance, distance, distance…"
Lily stood taller and smiled creepily, then began stalking toward Pomera. Her focus had shifted away from Kotone entirely.
"Fire Magic Level 7: Fireflies!"
Pomera cast another spell and a dozen balls of fire shot toward the fiend. Pomera hoped that the multiple seeking missiles would succeed where Laelaps's Fang had failed.
But even they couldn't keep up with Lily's erratic movements. At the last moment, the spider girl's maneuvers made the missiles veer off target, strike the ground, and disappear in small explosions. One ball of flame stayed true, but Lily slashed it with a claw, and it dissipated.
"Is, is, is that it? Hee hee hee… Is that it, it, it?"
It didn't look like any of Pomera's attacks would work against Lily. Fireflies had done a better job than Laelaps's Fang, but there was still no way Pomera was going to do damage at this rate.
"N-no way. B-but Kanata taught me so much. I thought I'd grown so strong…" Pomera's arms trembled as she gripped her staff. She was no match for the monster. She couldn't even hold her ground.
At their current distance, the battle still favored a magic user. But if Pomera didn't act quickly, Lily would close into melee range. Pomera was well aware of this, but she still hesitated. What could she cast that would make any difference?

“Hmph, I knew you were still green. This isn’t the time to freeze up, kid,” said Rosemonde, readying her staff and moving in front of Pomera.
“R-Rosemonde?! What are you—”
“You ready? I’m going to draw its attention! When you see an opening, you hit it with everything you got. I’m sticking my neck out here, and I’ll be hells of pissed if you miss the opportunity I’m about to give you!”
“It’s too dangerous! You’ll die if we fail!”
“Come on, kid! You took this job knowing there was a demon king. You shoulda been ready to die the moment it showed up. I warned you not to go into a fight without thinking about it first. Besides, I’m wearing this armor for a reason.”
“R-Rosemonde…”
As Lily rushed toward them, she saw Rosemonde and shook her head in pity. “So, so, so…pathetic! I’ll eat you all!”
“Eat this!” With all her might, Rosemonde swung her cross-shaped staff against Lily, but the spider girl easily kicked it away with a front leg. Rosemonde was sent flying and skidded across the ground. Shattered pieces of her armor flew in all directions. Her goat mask was left lying on the ground, broken.
Pomera was poised to strike, but there wasn’t a single opening in Lily’s defenses.
“It’s futile, futile, futile…” Lily said with a giggle. She then turned toward Rosemonde, who was struggling to stand up.
“Don’t miss, kid,” said Rosemonde, grinning. “Earth Magic Level 7: Ground Bomb!”
The ground in front of Rosemonde peeled away and formed a huge dirt sphere—Rosemonde’s most powerful spell, and the reason she wore her heavy armor. But her armor was in tatters and there was no way for her to escape the blast radius.
Pomera couldn’t stop her; Rosemonde had known the risk. All Pomera could do was to make sure the sacrifice wasn’t in vain. She readied her staff and focused her mind. The opening she was waiting for was just a moment away.
“Get wrecked!” howled Rosemonde, and Ground Bomb exploded.
Not even Lily could evade Rosemonde’s suicide attack. The silhouette of the spider was framed by the bright fire of Ground Bomb’s blast.
“Thank you, Rosemonde! Laelaps’s Fang!” A beast of lightning shot from Pomera’s staff toward Lily.
The spider girl leapt up, escaping Pomera’s spell for a second time. “Even, even, even with a clever trick like that, I know what you’re doing!”
“I-I missed…” Pomera listlessly dropped the arm holding her staff.
Then something fell from the sky, heading straight toward Lily.
“Guillotine of the Mad Queen!”

Kotone's hands gripped a blood-red blade almost as tall as she was. In the confusion, she had used Short Gate to appear high above Lily. The weapon didn't even have a pommel; it was a simple, cruel, red blade.
"Impossible!"
Lily tried to parry with her right hand. She succeeded in deflecting Kotone, but her right arm was sliced off as it repelled the blade. Blood spewed from the wound and she crashed to the ground.
"G-gaaah! A-agh! My arm, my arm, my arm!" Lily pressed down on her severed limb with her functional hand as she rose back to her feet.
It was just in time for Pomera's next lightning beast to charge straight into her body.
"Gaaaah!" Lily wobbled, smoldered, and collapsed to the ground.
"Th-thank goodness…" said Pomera in relief, then she ran over to Rosemonde. "Rosemonde! H-hold on, I'll heal you now!"
"Huh? …Oh. Good job, kid," said Rosemonde, rising to her knees.
"Please lie back down!"
A cheer rose from the adventurers who had been watching in horror from a distance.
"Th-they beat that monster?"
"Amazing! That magic user finished off an enemy that even Aries's Hand couldn't stand against!"
When Pomera got to Rosemonde's side, the sorcerer was looking at the adventurers in the distance.
"Good thing I stuck around, kid. You probably wouldn't have been able to kill that spider chick without me," said Rosemonde.
"You're right. You helped a lot," said Pomera with a small smile.
Lily rose to her feet.
"D-d-don't assume I'm dead, dead, dead."
"Not again…" groaned Pomera in shock as the crowd fell silent.
"M-my body wouldn't move for a moment, moment, moment, and I fell over. That's all. Did you re-re-really think a little spell like that could kill me, me, *me*?" Lily pressed down on her severed right arm. Her shoulder spasmed violently and a new limb began to grow from the stump. Lily smiled in satisfaction at the look of terror on the adventurers' faces.
"A few, few, few measly humans thought they could beat me… Ah, humans are so em-em-empty-headed it's…p-p-pathetic!"
Lily leapt toward Pomera, and the white mage felt peace wash over her as she accepted her imminent death.
Two huge arms appeared from the ground and grabbed Lily.
"Wha, wha, what?!" said Lily in confusion. Then the hands clenched into fists, sending crushed bits of Lily plopping to the ground, along with copious amounts of goop. Then the two arms disappeared.
"A-aaah! How, how, how?!" Lily's torso writhed on the ground for a moment before her neck flopped to the side and she stopped breathing.

Pomera turned back to see Philia looking apologetic and smug at the same time.
“Sorry, Pomera,” said Philia. “U-um, Philia didn’t know when to attack… Maybe it should have been sooner, right? Is Pomera mad?”
Pomera couldn’t speak for a moment, but then she slowly patted Philia’s head. “No, Philia, I’m not mad. Thank you. But maybe you should apologize to Rosemonde too. I’ll apologize with you…”
Even the adventurers in the distance remained silent.
Rosemonde tried to speak, but couldn’t find anything to say.

—5—

THE CIRCLE Garnet had drawn on the map was almost spot on. I was constantly surprised by his ability to see things as they were, and I couldn’t help worrying that he might have figured me out too. Either way, I owed him a lot, and I still wanted to have him as a friend rather than an enemy.
Probably shouldn’t let my mind wander…
The tunnel continued as far as I could see, and every inch of the surface was covered in squirming ragni. If I closed my eyes and threw a rock, I’d still hit one. There were just so many.
“I can’t believe they did this so close to Manaloch.”
I tried not to think about the bugs too hard, because they kind of made me nauseous. There was a constant rasping sound of their legs rubbing against each other. That sound echoed up and down the tunnel, so I heard it layered on top of itself many times.
Chunks of a strange glowing ore that were embedded in the walls served as lamps. It was still dim, but I could at least see where I was going. Ragni could see in the dark, so the fact that they had intentionally installed lamps meant that there was *something else* down here that couldn’t.
Then the walls came alive with ragni scuttling toward me. They had finally realized I was an invader. Thousands of them surged down the tunnel.
“At twenty-five thousand each, I’d be set for life…” I muttered to myself and sighed. I knew that was unrealistic. Even a rich city like Manaloch would run out of money before they could pay off all these bounties.
I stopped daydreaming and focused on the matter at hand. If I spent too long in the nest, the demon king would notice me. I needed to get the information and get out to deliver it to Garnet.
“Space-time Magic Level 10: Dimension Slash.”
I made a slashing motion with my index finger and the massed ragni came apart as my gesture passed across them. The tunnel was awash in ragno blood and ichor.
Ugh. Gross.
I ran deeper into the den, stepping through the fallen bodies of ragni and casting Dimension Slash to clear the way before me. I needed to be

cautious; a spell like Gravity Bomb or Inferno Sphere might accidentally collapse the tunnel and leave my path blocked. Thankfully, Dimension Slash mowed them down without me even having to break a sweat.
I had been going for a little while when I heard the rustling of something that wasn't any sort of ragno that I recognized.
"Impressive. You made it all this way by yourself." The voice was human, but I looked around and saw no one.
"Who are you? Where are you hiding…?" The cavern's echo made it impossible to find them by sound alone. I peered through the gloom.
"You can call me Molly… Of the four sisters that serve our Mother, I am the third. Your skills have given our ragni quite a difficult time, but I don't think you'll do so well against me."
"F-four sisters serving your Mother?"
"Yes! Four! Though I doubt you'll be meeting any of the others. Ha ha! You know, I thought all humans were pathetically weak—but you seem a bit different. At the very least, try to entertain me."
I gulped.
This was the first intelligent monster I'd encountered since leaving Cocytus. Its level was likely on par with creatures I'd fought there.
Even worse—it didn't sound like the one in charge. Who was this *Mother* it was talking about? Was that the demon king?
"Ha ha ha! I've been having such trouble finding an opponent who can give me a suitable fight. My threads can slice through anything… Let me test them out on you!"
"This actually works out well for me," I said. "I wanted to know more about you and your allies. Maybe you'll still be this talkative after I capture you."
"Catch me if you can, human! I'll have my fun with you, then kill you!"
Something fell through the air behind me. That answered the question of where she was: she'd been hiding on the ceiling.
"There you are!" I turned to point at a red-haired girl hanging upside-down from a suspended thread. Her upper half was human, but the bottom was a spider. She glared at me with wide eyes and a cruel smile. She was enjoying this.
That's when I heard something tear.
A red line ran across Molly's abdomen. She looked down in puzzlement.
"Wh-what…? Impossible. But… Mother, I'm…"
Molly's body started to slide apart, bisected. Her upper body fell to the ground while blood poured from the spider half that was still hanging from the ceiling. I was pretty sure she wasn't trying to trick me with an illusion. She was dead.
How the heck did that happen?!
Then I glanced at my index finger, still extended. It all fell into place. While I had turned to face Molly, I had accidentally hit her with a Dimension Slash. I'd never dismissed the spell and had been pointing anywhere I looked.

She was way weaker than I expected. Guess I shouldn't assume too much about intelligent monsters…and maybe I need to be more careful with Dimension Slash.

I considered putting a stop to my Dimension Slashes entirely, but it was still the best way to take care of large waves of ragni.

Now I just needed to find the other sisters, and maybe Mother. Garnet was right, they were intelligent. *It shouldn't be too hard to get information on the demon king.*

—6—

MORE DEAD RAGNI fell to Dimension Slash as I explored deeper into the expansive tunnel system. The path kept branching off, and I was starting to get worried that I might never find my way back. Hopefully, I would be able to follow the trail of dead bugs.

Down in the lower levels, the ragni started to change. Above, they had always been a uniform black. Now I was seeing some that had mottled red spots, and occasionally I even came across ones that had a shiny gold carapace.

They all still died in one hit.

I stood in an open cavern, waving my finger around. Hundreds of ragni split apart and leaked their juices across the floor. Even though I could cast the spell with little effort, the constant use left me a little tired. My breathing was heavy, and I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

A pale blue thread flew at me, and I leapt backward. It pierced the ground directly in front of me, bubbling and dissolving the earth underneath.

That's not good.

I heard a gravelly, vaguely feminine voice say, "Hmm…well evaded. Welcome, my little hero. You've finally made it."

A massive monster stepped into the dim light of the cavern.

Just like Molly, this creature had the top half of a woman and the lower half of a spider. But unlike Molly, she was colossal—easily thirty feet tall as she walked out of the gloom.

Also, while Molly's human half had been vaguely attractive, this creature wasn't cute at all. Her pockmarked face was pale blue and split from ear to ear with a gaping mouth. Eight red eyes of differing size rolled and quivered on her forehead, looking at everything and nothing at once. Embedded in her lower half was a plum-colored crystal that glinted evilly in the dim light of the ore lanterns.

"Aren't you a bold one?" said the creature. "I knew the humans were aware of our presence, but I never thought one of you would come barging in here alone. Did you think you could kill Mother all by yourself? How naïve."

So, this is the demon king?

I had wanted to eliminate the three other sisters before taking on the demon king. The last thing I wanted was another high-level monster cutting in during our fight. Better to whittle down their strength a little at a time instead of facing them all at once, you know? But, well, that plan was out the window.
I had no doubt that this was the demon king—the monstrous aura she emitted was in a totally different league from Molly's. Hopefully, I could still complete my mission instead of blundering into a terrible death here in the center of her nest.
Keeping my eyes on Mother, I slowly backed toward the tunnel. My original goal had been to confirm her level—once I used Status Check, I could run away with a clean conscience and that would be the end of my spy work. With that information in hand, the human kingdom would have a chance to develop a strategy against her. Hopefully, there'd be enough time to do it before she could make more spiders; I'd managed to seriously reduce the number of ragni on my way down.
"Oh… Running away after you made it this far?" said Mother. "You're in too deep, little hero. Spiders are excellent at chasing down prey. You seem capable, but you're not that fast. There's no turning back."
Her eight red eyes narrowed threateningly. It was time to use Status Check before it was too late.

MOTHER
Race: Queen Arachne
Lv: 999
HP: 7192/7192
MP: 3561/3596

"R-really? That's it?" I said, dubiously. Something was weird. It was like she'd reached a max level.
I checked her status again, just to be sure. The information didn't change. Why was her level exactly 999? Levels above one thousand had been the norm in Cocytus, and Philia was level 1,800.
But Philia was a homunculus created in ancient times to protect humanity against demon kings. She was even worshiped as the God of Terror. She could probably have handled this whole situation by herself, provided she didn't get distracted by a butterfly in the process.
"I suppose this means you've killed my beloved Molly." said Mother. "And it looks like you've killed so many of my littler children too. No mercy for you, little hero. I'll pluck off your arms and legs. I'll drink the juices of your brain while you still live. Ha ha! The brain of a high-level adventurer is a delectable thing indeed!"
If that was the case, then Mother's brain probably tasted pretty mediocre… not that I'd try eating her brain in the first place.
Seriously, this is the demon king that everyone is so worked up about?

I gawked in amazement. People were freaking out about an enemy who wasn't even level 1,000? Granted, most A-rank adventurers weren't even level 100—but this just seemed like a letdown.
"Oh dear, what's wrong? You've frozen up in fear. Come now, show Mother what you're made of."
Mother seemed like she wanted me to respond to her heckling, and I needed some more information. What did I have to lose? I asked, "Um… You're not one of those four sisters or whatever, right? I just want to make sure. You are the demon king?"
Mother swung an arm. Four massive sword-like claws slashed through the wall and the ragni that were clinging to it. The small spiders exploded in a spray of blood and goop, their bodies falling to the ground. The other ragni quickly scurried away from Mother.
Mother charged toward me, screaming. "The insolence! Are you trying to anger me? Well, you've succeeded. I will have my satisfaction and kill you!"
Th-that's fair. It would be pretty weird for a daughter to be called Mother. I should have thought of that earlier.
"I'll fix your arrogant attitude! The demon king will teach you the true meaning of fear!" Mother raised a tree trunk-thick arm. "Half-wit! You dare challenge me by yourself! Lament your stupidity as I tear you to pieces!"
Mother slashed down, aiming for me with her claws. I easily moved to the right to evade as the claws pierced the ground, causing cracks to run across the stone floor.
"Your reflexes are swift, little hero! But how long can you keep that up?"
Mother struck again with her other arm. I leapt to the side and up, dodging the claws. I wished I could see her full stats—Status Check only told me her level, HP, and MP. Then again, I didn't think her other stats would be mind-blowing.
"Scurry and run, scurry and run… I had planned to take off your arms and legs first, but you're far too annoying! Enough!" Mother lashed out with a claw attack aimed for my head.
I bent my neck and the swipe safely passed overhead without making any contact. Mother's attacks were getting sloppier as her frustration grew. Nothing was hitting me.
"How strange. Have I grown dull while hiding myself in the nest? I can't even scratch a measly human!"
Mother struck with a descending blow. I lifted my left arm and stopped her claws with my bare hand.
"What the…?!" said Mother.
I could tell she was pushing with her arm, desperately trying to destroy me. She pushed harder and harder with growing agitation.
"No! There's no way a human can be as powerful as I am!"
"Okay. I think we're done," I said, drawing the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh with my right hand as my left held back Mother's claws. Eight misshapen

eyes all looked at the blade at the same time and her massive mouth began to tremble.
“Stop!” All of her eyes stared at me, emitting a red glow that wrapped around my body. “How unfortunate…for you! Ha ha ha! I normally save my Binding Stare for real threats. Your strength is surprising, but I still have the upper hand against an enemy with no magic!”
Mother raised her other arm to strike. I focused all my magic and pushed back against the effect.
“Hah!”
“Agh, aaaah! My eyes, my eyes!”
My magical feedback pushed the red light back to her face and triggered a chain reaction. One after another, all eight of her eyes exploded. Mother howled in pain and staggered back.
Grasping her clawed hand, which had been trying to crush me, I lifted and threw her against the far wall.
“Gaaaaah!”
The entire nest shook from the impact, and the ragni surrounding us dashed away in fear.
Mother pulled herself up from the rubble and turned to me. The whole nest shook again, and clumps of dirt fell around her.
“H-how?! How could my Binding Stare have no effect? Stop, stooop! I command it!”
The ruins of her eyes still shone with a dull red glow. As the crimson light washed over me, it tried to latch onto my body, but I kept brushing it away with my magic.
Each time I did, Mother’s eyes spurted blood. I guessed that the Binding Stare relied on superior magic power to harm the person she was staring at. But since my MP was so much greater than hers, it kept backfiring.
“Stooop! Pleeease stop! Whyyy?!” screamed Mother, her mouth gaping wide. Her pockmarked face was slick with blood, and it contorted as her muscles tensed with pain. Her empty eye sockets opened so wide that it looked like her eyelids might tear away at the corners, and the red light intensified.
“Gah!” My feet suddenly felt heavy and I couldn’t move forward.
“G-g-good… Y-you really gave me a hard time, but this is the end for you!” she said.
I channeled my magic into my legs, struggling to overcome her Binding Stare. Finally, I felt a hint of control return, and I forced my foot forward. The crimson light around me shattered.
Mother’s massive body was rocked back. Her arms trembled violently.
“Gone… Gone?! How?! It took all of my magic power just to hold this human for a brief moment?!”
I readied the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and advanced.
Clods of dirt began floating around Mother. I squinted to see they were being held aloft by silk threads.

“No! I’m special! I am chosen by the will of the world! I am a demon king among demon kings! A god among monsters! I will end the age of humanity and build a new world… This, this isn’t how the story was supposed to go!”
Mother recklessly swung her arms, sending the floating dirt clods flying in my direction. My sword cut them from the air, each one smoking and fizzling to ash as the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh’s magic worked its effect.
“S-stay away! Get back! Monster! You mooonster!”
I closed in for an attack before the demon king could surprise me again. Both of Mother’s arms fell to the ground, blood oozing from the stumps as she shrieked.
“Noooo! Lily! Molly! Mary! Dory! Save me! Save your mother!” The demon king writhed in pain.
I struck again, carving a wound across Mother’s abdomen. Blood and organs spewed out as her upper body landed with a thud on the ground.
“Aah, aaah!” Mother’s top and bottom halves convulsed, but the movements slowed as her spilled blood pooled on the ground beneath her broken body.
“No, no! I have the protection of the will of the world, I can’t…”
Her babbling cries grew quieter and quieter. The fight was over. Having been cut with the Heroic Sword Gilgamesh, Mother’s body started to decay into sand and ash. She would soon be dead.
“Looks like this is the end,” I said, letting out a sigh of relief. I returned the Heroic Sword Gilgamesh to its sheath.
“Th-th-this is the end? Ah ha ha, ha ha ha!” Mother had decayed up to her neck, but she put every ounce of strength she had left into mocking me with her weak voice. “Y-you’re wrong! This isn’t over yet!”
“Wh-what…?”
Maybe she was just refusing to accept defeat, but maybe there was something more. Coated in blood, her face twisted into an agonized grin as she let out a disturbing laugh.
“Aha ha! You may have defeated Molly, but…what about my other three daughters?” she said.
I gulped. She was right, I’d only seen Molly.
“Lily is already attacking the city. Hee hee, it will be a mountain of corpses by now.”
“Manaloch?!”
She was probably fighting Pomera and the others right about now. I wished I could run to their aid, but I had to trust them to do their jobs as defenders. Except…could Pomera defeat an opponent like Lily? How high was this Lily’s level?
Pomera was around level 200; things would get tough for her if Lily was any higher than that. I was seriously regretting killing Molly before I’d been able to confirm her level. Philia was also in Manaloch, so I didn’t think they would have any problems, but…
“My second daughter, Mary, is very cunning, and the oldest, Dory, hides an even greater potential than me. My beloved, treasured daughters will sense

my death and flee to where you will never find them. They will grow in power and become your ruin… They will kill you. They will be the end of you!”
This was *not* good. It would be a mistake to leave survivors behind. I had to find them and finish them off before they killed anyone else.
As Mother cackled at my predicament, the room shook, and a crack formed in the ceiling. Part of the roof collapsed, and something fell down from above, dust filling the air.
It was a spider, even more gigantic than Mother. But it didn’t have a human upper half—it was a plain old giant black spider.
It lay on its back, dead and unmoving with blood streaming from its palps.
“Dory?! M-my Dooory?!” screeched Mother, basically just a screaming head at this point.
A girl stood on the belly of the gigantic spider. She had white silken hair, which she worked to straighten after it had been mussed by the fall into the cavern. The tips of her hair were red, almost like they’d been dipped in blood. Illuminated by the dim golden light of the ore lanterns, she looked godly.
She ran her slender fingers through her hair and glanced at Mother’s head. Then she looked at me with one emerald and one crimson eye like nothing had happened.
“L-Lunaère-san…?”
She wasn’t wearing the black robe she’d had on when I saw her in Manaloch. Instead, she was in her usual white clothing that she wore in Cocytus.
I’d never seen another girl so beautiful.
She blinked when I said her name, then tossed something idly to her feet. It rolled off the body of the gigantic spider and fell to the ground.
It was a human head. No, it was a *monster* head with eight eyes, arranged symmetrically on its forehead.
“M-Mary…! Ah, agh, no…” Mother looked up at the cavern roof listlessly. Her head faded to white as if it were turning to stone. Cracks ran through it, and it crumbled away.
The death of her beloved daughters had broken her spirit. If she had died just a little faster, she could have left without the knowledge that her children were dead. Bad luck for her…even if she was a demon king.
Well, that’s three down…
All that was left was the youngest, Lily, who had gone off to Manaloch. If Pomera and Philia managed to defeat her, that meant the threat was truly gone.
Lunaère must have run into Mary and Dory on the upper floors. They’d probably started fighting, and, well…the spiders never stood a chance. Considering how weak Mother was, the four sisters wouldn’t have been able to scratch Lunaère even if they attacked her all at once.

But why was Lunaère here now? She'd said she couldn't leave Cocytus because of her aura of unholy impurity. But I was certain that the black-robed magic user we'd run into in Manaloch was Lunaère, just in different clothing.
Why wasn't she saying anything?
Had she forgotten to tell me something important before I left? Why was she here?
Not that I didn't appreciate the assist on getting rid of the daughters, but I doubted that was the reason for this visit. My questions were endless.
"L-Lunaère-san, what… Why are you here?" I asked. She blinked her mismatched eyes, then gently brought a hand to her mouth in unease.
"Lunaère-san?"
She cleared her throat lightly and looked away. "Kanata. What a coincidence. I didn't expect to run into you in a place like this."
"Th-this is clearly not a coincidence!" I said without thinking. Normally I'd have given her the benefit of the doubt, but this was just too much!

Lunaère jumped, and her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. With her usual emotionless tone, she said, “Is it really that strange? I sensed a powerful monster and came to investigate. That’s all. If left to its own devices, a monster like that could easily destroy a whole country. I’ve always done this sort of thing. I had no idea that you would be here as well, Kanata.”
“B-but you said you absolutely never left Cocytus…”
“Ah, yes… But there have been a few exceptions. It happens so rarely that it’s easy to forget.”
“But…”
“Well, I suppose it’s not entirely coincidence that we met here,” said Lunaère, as if she were rationalizing our encounter. “The only people who would set foot in the den of an unknown demon king are you and me. Isn’t that right?”
“I guess so,” I said.
That…sort of made sense. There was no doubt that Lunaère had complicated emotions when it came to the safety of humans. She had been concerned for me despite not knowing me at all, given me valuable items, and worked hard on training me. Maybe someone like that *would* secretly protect the world from the threat of demon kings.
I’d gone and assumed Lunaère had left Cocytus to come see how I was doing, but that hadn’t been the reason at all… Now I felt really bummed out.
“W-well, it would be a lie to say that I didn’t want to see you… I suppose some part of me was hoping I could,” said Lunaère, watching me from the corner of her eye as she twirled the red tips of her hair around one of her fingers.
“Really? That makes me so happy! I…I thought it might be years until I could see you again,” I said.
“I-I see. So you’re really happy to see me?” Lunaère cast her eyes down and dropped her voice slightly. I thought I saw the beginning of a smile.
My face started to turn a little red. I tried to look into her downturned eyes, but she quickly looked away.
“Lunaère-san?”
“Ahem. Well…it seems that you’ve dealt with the demon king,” she said, refusing to face me as she looked at the ashy remains of Mother.
Mother’s body was almost entirely destroyed. All that remained were burned muscle fragments, bodily fluids, and bones. In the center of the charred lump of flesh was the large plum-colored crystal that had been embedded in Mother’s chest.
“I’ve never seen a monsters’ nest this large,” said Lunaère. “It must have developed very rapidly, considering that it went undetected until now.”
“So this is a serious incident?”
“Yes. Were you able to check her level?” She poked Mother’s remains with the toe of her boot.

“It was 999. She had a lot of underlings too…”
Lunaère narrowed her dichromatic eyes. “She was that high?! I’ve never heard of a demon king going undetected until they got that powerful… I hope it’s not a sign of things to come.”
“It was that bad?” I asked.
Lunaère sighed in frustration. “You only know Cocytus, and you haven’t spent enough time outside. She was powerful enough to destroy a large country even if it threw its entire army at her.”
“Huh…” An image of Mother groveling on the ground in front of a smug Philia appeared in my mind. If level 1,000 was the most powerful class of demon king, then what the heck was Philia at 3,000?
“The weakest type of demon kings are usually around level 300,” continued Lunaère. “Even those can wipe a small country off the map if they don’t handle the situation properly.”
“Seriously?”
Notts had been near level 400. Did that mean he had been powerful enough to take on an entire kingdom by himself without Zolophilia?
“Kanata, don’t be so dense,” said Lunaère. “Your ideas have been skewed by the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm. But it’s hard to believe you can be so naïve. Although…I-I guess it’s kind of cute. I don’t hate it…”
I was utterly confused. Was this why my standards were so off? If…if all that was true, then there was a very important thing I needed to know.
“Lunaère-san?”
“What is it, Kanata?” she asked with a smile.
“Uh… You said that I should be at least level 4,000 in order to live safely in the outside world …”
The smile vanished from Lunaère’s face and her eyes opened wide.
I continued. “But if level 1,000 is a high enough level to destroy a large country…wh-what does that make me?”
“N-n-no, you misunderstand! Uh…i-it’s just…” She desperately avoided making eye contact as she became agitated. “I-I swear I wasn’t trying to wear you down with incredibly unrealistic training so I could keep you in Cocytus forever!”
“Calm down, Lunaère-san! No one’s accusing of something so horrible! It’s just…my sense of things is so off that I wanted to correct it.”
“I-I was sad to see you go. I might have set your target level a little bit higher than necessary, but…umm.” Lunaère pressed her fingers to her mouth, then blurted out, “Th-they exist! Level 4,000 and even level 5,000 enemies. M-maybe I was exaggerating when I said a level 1,000 demon king could stand against a large country.”
“Lunaère-san…”
“I-I’ve even run into enemies who were nearly level 10,000!”
“Really?!”
“R-really! I swear!” Lunaère, normally so expressionless, looked at me uneasily like she was begging me to believe her.

“I-I see. Is that so? And people from another world seem to get targeted more often. I’ll be careful,” I said with a nod, acting like she’d convinced me.
Lunaère let out a heavy sigh of relief. “W-well, with your level, I think you’ll be able to manage most dangers you find yourself in.”
M-maybe I should switch topics…
I made a mental note to apologize to Rosemonde. After these revelations, I knew exactly why she’d been so angry with me for not knowing anything.
“So, Kanata, how have you been since you left Cocytus? How is civilization treating you?” asked Lunaère.
“Things have been tough.” I nodded, thinking to myself. “I ended up getting into some…*unexpected* situations. But I think overall it’s been pretty fun, and I think I’m adjusting well.” I forced a smile.
Culturally speaking, that was true. I never felt any stress when it came to the food or customs of Locklorian society. The world had been created by the gods for the express purpose of bringing people from other worlds to it and turning the locals into characters in a show; it made sense to ensure it would be understandable to an outsider.
And thanks to Lunaère’s training, I’d managed to overcome any other problem I’d faced—dangerous adventurers, Zolophilia, and now the demon king.
“That’s good,” said Lunaère. “So…how are you doing on the, ah, relationship area? Any new friends I should know about?”
“Uh…relationship area?”
“It’s been so long since I’ve seen you. I-I just wanted to know what kind of people you’re associating with.”
“Oh, right. I’ve met a lot of people. Garnet-san really stands out, I think.” He seemed like the heart of Manaloch. In a strange way, he reminded me of Lunaère—an inherently friendly person that somehow managed to be really scary at times.
Lunaère’s eyebrow arched very slightly in question.
“You’d really like him if you met. He’s both the guildmaster of Manaloch and an executive of the Mithril Wand, an alchemy research institute—”
She cut me off with a wave of her hand. “Are…are there any *other* people you see more often?” asked Lunaère like she was hurrying me along.
“Uh, well… I guess I could tell you about Philia-chan.” I wondered if Lunaère had ever heard of Zolophilia.
“Perhaps you’re avoiding talking about someone because you feel guilty…?” Lunaère stared at my face with her bicolored eyes.
“Huh?”
“N-nothing! It’s nothing. S-say, Kanata, have you met any elves yet? They have long ears and skill in spirit magic.”
Wh-why on earth is she suddenly asking about elves?
She stared at me expectantly.
“Um… Are you trying to ask about Pomera-san?” I asked.

“I-I don’t know who that is. I just wanted to ask about your adventuring companions.”
“How do you know she’s my adventuring companion?”
Lunaère practically leapt out of her skin. “I just guessed based on the process of elimination…”
“You’ve seen Philia-chan and Pomera-san before. Why didn’t you try talking to me then?”
“Th-th-that’s… No, I…” Lunaère’s face turned redder and redder. Her eyes darted left and right in a panic. To be honest, she was kind of cute when she was flustered.
“I-I didn’t do anything like that,” she finally said.
“Huh? But…”
“It m-must have been someone who looked like me. Things would go very badly if I tried to go into the city, because of my unholy aura. S-so, it wasn’t me. I d-don’t even know anything about a black robe,” Lunaère said quickly, small tears even forming in her eyes.
“Lunaère-san, I’m not sure this’ll come out right…but no matter what happens, I’ll never hate you.”
When I spoke, Lunaère’s white cheeks turned a deep crimson, and she looked dismayed. She turned her face away, and she tried to hide behind her collar. She glanced quickly at me, then her eyebrows came together in determination. She blinked, steadied her breathing, and turned to face me again.
“A-actually, there’s something I want to tell you, Kanata,” she said.
“Huh?”
“Yes, actually, it’s about a robe to suppress my aura.”
Was that the black robe with red symbols? She must have made it in order to come outside. It would explain how she was able to go into the city. Which meant Lunaère could walk around freely now, right? “Lunaère-san, does that mean you’re going to see the outside world with—”
“I was just going to say that I know nothing about such a robe.” Sweat ran down her forehead. She pressed her hand to her mouth and looked like she had accidentally let something slip.
“It’s okay, Lunaère-san! I think I’ve got a pretty good idea of what’s going on.”
“N-no, you’re wrong. That w-wasn’t me! I wouldn’t secretly follow you around, only to get noticed. Even if I did, I wouldn’t panic—or attack then run away!”
“Is *that* what happened?!”
Lunaère’s face went pale as she clamped her mouth shut. Then she said, “Wh-while this might have been just a coincidence, I’m glad I got the chance to speak with you. My work here is done. I’ll be going back to Cocytus now, but I look forward to seeing you again.” She drew a magic circle in the air.

“W-wait, Lunaère-san! I still have so much I want to talk to you about!” I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her closer to me, but she dodged and jabbed me in the forehead with her index finger.
“Ow!”
“Space-time Magic Level 10: Gate.”
Lunaère was engulfed in light. I tried to wrap my arms around her to stop her, but I passed through her vanishing form and fell to the ground.
Unlike Short Gate, Gate could be used to teleport as far as the user’s magic power would allow. It was one of the most complicated and time-consuming spells to cast, but Lunaère had completed it in mere moments.
“I have to find a way to stop her from leaving next time.”

—7—

THE DEMON KING Mother and her four daughters were dead. Only a large number of ragni were left to be cleaned up, and steady pressure on the part of Manaloch’s adventurers would make that happen.
Most importantly, the evacuation to Ploroque had been postponed.
The people of the city believed that Lily had been the demon king herself. With Lily dead, all that remained was an investigation to be sure that no other demon king might be hiding in the shadows. Once that was confirmed, the evacuation would be completely cancelled.
I held the plum-colored gem in my hand, plucked from the ruins of Mother’s corpse. It had a disconcerting evil aura, so I flipped open the Acacia Memoirs to learn more.

MOON OF THE ABYSS
Value Class: Godly
A crystal imbued with evil magic. Formed via alchemy from a mixture of the blood of thirteen powerful demon kings. Fragments of their souls still writhe within the crystal.
It has the power to enable a demon king to control far more monsters than usual, and if embedded in a monster’s body, it encourages dramatic growth.

How in the world did Mother get her hands on this dangerous thing?
This wasn’t something she would have just stumbled across in the forest while tending to her brood. It was just a hunch, but I was sure that Naiarotop was involved. I should have asked Lunaère about it.
For now, the safest place for the gem was inside my Dimension Pocket. It was dangerous, but I thought it could also end up being useful. Also…I couldn’t help myself. Now that I was beginning to understand the value of Godly level items, there was no way I was going to let it go waste.

With the demon king problem taken care of, it was time to relax a little. Pomera, Philia, and I decided to have a little celebration to mark our victory at a tavern called the Red Bat.
“Kanataaa, you’re so mean!” Pomera was pouting, her cheeks red. She wasn’t angry. No, it was worse—she was drunk. “You said you’d cover for Philia, and then you ran away! I thought I could count on you… I was shocked! Shocked and surprised!”
She sounded reproachful and banged her glass on the table. Cider splashed out.
“Shocked and surprised mean the same thing…” I said.
“I knooow!” said Pomera with a frown, then plunked her chin on the table.
“Pomera’s really fun right now!” said Philia.
“I’m fun aaall the time!” Pomera grabbed Philia and tickled her vigorously. Philia squealed with laughter and tried to get away.
“Pomera-san is broken…” I muttered as I watched.
First the Hunter’s Kitchen, now the Red Bat. This was the second time I’d seen Pomera in this condition.
She was the worst kind of drunk. At least she wasn’t trying to climb up my back this time. That was a minor improvement.
Last time, Pomera had begged me to forgive her the next day. She told me, “It’s the greatest embarrassment of my life. I’m so sorry I caused you all that trouble. I will never drink again for as long as I live.” She swore that to me with tears in her eyes.
So much for that promise.
“Kanata, this cider is sooo tasty!” said Pomera. “It’s sweet, and it’s got a rich fruity scent that spreads in my mouth…” She got a faraway look like she was trying to feel the inside of her mouth, then whispered, “It makes me forget bad things.”
“I am sorry for the trouble I put you through,” I said with a bow of my head.
“Seeeriously… No one will let me live this down for my whooole life. I’ll never, I’ll never get married…” she said, took a long swig of her cider, and laid her cheek on the table.
“Th-that’s not true. You’re very pretty, and—”
“Hee hee! If that’s what you think, you should do the responsible thing and marry meee!” Pomera tugged on the sleeve of my robe.
“P-please let go, Pomera-san!”
“Nooo, I’ll never let go!”
“I had no choice! It turned out okay in the end, right? We defeated the demon king. We protected Manaloch.”
“But, buuut…”
While Pomera was complaining, a pair of adventurers who looked like they’d just come back from a job saw her and let out cries of excitement.
“H-hey, isn’t that Pomera? She beat the demon king! I heard that even Aries’s Hand Kotone couldn’t stand against that monster, but Pomera beat it in one hit!”

“A-are you sure? She’s pretty drunk.”
I rubbed Pomera’s back. “P-Pomera-san, people are staring! Pull it together!”
The two adventurers came closer to us and one asked, “U-um, are you Pomera, the Holy Fist?”
Pomera frowned and pouted. Evidently, she was not a fan of her new nickname. I didn’t know if that was a better or worse than *Saint*.
The rumors had been flying since Philia created massive arms that crushed Lily to death. As the story kept getting told and retold, it changed into a tale of Pomera killing the demon king with her bare hands. I hadn’t believed it was *that* out of hand until I overheard another set of adventurers talking about it only a few hours before.
Between covering for Philia and bashing Alfred with her staff, Pomera had become famous. Now there was a widespread misconception that she was actually a strength-based fighter.
The story went that she’d punched the demon king to death with her bare hands, and she had been so full of fighting spirit that her arms had looked massive when she did. It was a miracle.
And now she was known as Pomera, the Holy Fist.
“Um, Miss Holy Fist, could I shake your hand? I’m a huge fan!” asked one of the adventurers.
Pomera boxed with the air a bit and said, “Pomera’s off right now. I’m having a nice relaxing drink with Kanata. Get in my way and you’ll get the fist!”
The two adventurers backed away and left the tavern.
“Pomera’s so cool! Holy Fist Pomera!” said Philia, hugging Pomera. Pomera looked proud of herself and chugged the rest of her cider.

—8—

PAUSING TO PUT ON her Impurity Sealing Robe to dampen her aura before entering Manaloch, Lunaère returned to the church to meet up with Noble.
“He looked so serious and said, ‘No matter what happens, I’ll never hate you.’ I-I had no idea what to say. Where does he get off saying something like that? Like when we first parted ways in Cocytus…” said Lunaère.
Noble just stared at her. Normally, he’d have some sarcastic remark, but that wasn’t the case now.
“Are you even listening, Noble?”
“I get it, you’re in love. You’re also boring the crap out of me.”
“You’re the one who wanted to know what happened! You told me to tell you about Kanata, so that’s what I’m doing. Fine. Whatever. You don’t have to listen if you don’t want to,” Lunaère crossed her arms and frowned with a huff.

“Eh…guess my question wasn’t clear enough. Here, let me be more direct: Why did you run away from him?!”
“Uh…” Lunaère’s eyebrows lowered with unease. “Can’t you just be happy that I managed to talk to him? Th-the reason I came back isn’t that important, is it?”
“It’s definitely important.”
“But the situation is getting better, right? Why are you so unhappy?”
“What excuse are you going to make up to leave him next time? Will there even be a next time?”
Lunaère blinked her large eyes. “I did say that I didn’t know anything about an Impurity Sealing Robe, and that I was going back to Cocytus. I-I just got swept up…”
“Oh! We’re going home now?”
“N-no! B-but there’s that half-elf girl with Kanata and everything!”
“Then you go find him this instant! Get moving, Lady!”
“N-no! I…I said I was going back to Cocytus! And that I know nothing about a black robe! I’ll look like an idiot if I show up in a black robe right after saying that!”
Noble fell over on his side, exasperated. “For the love of… Take me with you next time. I’ll clear everything up. And I want to see Kanata too.”
“I can’t. You don’t understand people’s emotions. You just tell them to do this and do that. What will happen if you say something you can’t take back?”
“Hey, Lunaère, have I ever actually said something that bad? Besides, Kanata made a point of telling you he wouldn’t hate you no matter what. You should believe him.”
“He did…b-but that’s unrelated to this!”
This conversation was going nowhere fast, and Noble was getting fed up. Just then, they heard a loud voice from outside the church—some sort of fuss was kicking up outside.
“What’s going on? It sounds like a riot…” Lunaère cocked her head to listen. During Lunaère’s time as a human, she remembered people inevitably growing angry at the increased taxes needed to rebuild the city or kingdom after the downfall of a demon king—things like that. Often, that anger resulted in riots. Lunaère even knew of countries that had survived a demon king’s assault only to be destroyed by the following civil unrest.
With the stress of a forced evacuation followed by the sudden cancellation of that plan, it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that Manaloch would see riots break out in the coming days.
“No…” said Noble, “I think they’re suspicious of this place.”
“This place? Noble, have you done something—”
“Me?! No, Lady, it was *you*! You nearly blew up the church, then repaired it to look better than new!”
“Yes… I did, didn’t I.” Lunaère looked around the church. It was immaculate, since she’d cast Object Memory to repair the building. During

a moment of distraction, she'd let the spell run to completion. Now the building was in the same condition as the day it opened.
"Perhaps I should have placed some sort of disguise on it." She scratched her chin as she pondered.
"Too late for that now. Maybe we should get out of here?"
"But my Impurity Sealing Robe isn't perfect. We can't very well check into a normal inn. We could leave the city…but then I won't be able to spy—I mean, *watch over*—Kanata. It would be better to stay in the city."
"Sure."
"I can't trust that half-elf to be alone with my Kanata," she muttered.
"R-right," said Noble in frustration. Then he perked up as he remembered something.
"What's wrong?" asked Lunaère.
"So, uh, what'd you bring me back this time?"
"I didn't get you anything."
"Oh, come on! I'm stuck here with nothing to do but listen to you complain, and you didn't even have the gratitude to bring me a snack."
"F-fine, fine! I'll find you something."
"I liked those things from before! The, uh, Groundnut cakes?"
"Groundnut Pies."
"Yeaaah, Groundnut *Pies*. Those were great!"
Lunaère heaved a sigh. "It's rare for you to be so insistent. All right, I'll buy you some."
Suddenly, the front door swung open, and they heard the footsteps of multiple people making their way inside.
"Lunaère! We gotta get outta here, quick!"
"They're coming right this way. Just act like a normal treasure chest until they leave."
"O-okay."
Lunaère disappeared into the shadows a moment before five humans entered the small room she and Noble had been sharing. Leading the group was an obese middle-aged man wearing a gaudy white and red robe. His hairline was receding, and his face was accentuated by his prominent jowls.
"Reverend Doàr, what could this mean?!" said one of the other men. "This place hasn't been touched for decades!"
"It's a miracle. We've witnessed a miracle! This is surely a sign of the heavens' love!" said the fat man, falling to his knees and sobbing.
"A sign of the heavens' love…?"
"Yes! We cannot waste this undeniable display of divine favor!"
"What would be the best course of action, then?"
"Mm! We must spread the news! Then collect donations and tithes!"
"I see…"
Doàr's beady eyes darted throughout the church and landed on a lavishly decorated treasure chest, which he shuffled toward on hurried feet.
"What is it, Reverend Doàr?"

“I…I sense a terrifying curse! Yes, it must be. This treasure chest is cursed! The city of Manaloch has no future if I fail to purify it!”
“But why is a cursed chest inside a church blessed by the love of the heavens?”
“I don’t know! It must be a test.”
“Perhaps…”
Doàr pointed a pudgy finger at the door of the church. “Carry it to my home! I’ll deal with it there. You must not open it! It is a truly evil curse and a danger to anyone lacking faith! I must cleanse it alone!”
“Y-yes, sir!”
Two of Doàr’s subordinates lifted Noble and struggled as they carried him away.
“I think that wraps up my inspection,” said Doàr.
“Huh…? Y-you’re not going to conduct a more thorough investigation?”
“That can wait. The curse of the chest must be handled. Instruct everyone to begin spreading the news of this miracle and asking for donations. I’ll be busy for the next few days!”
Doàr and his entourage left the church in a rush.
Lunaère quietly peered through a window and watched the group as they strode swiftly down the street.
“…He’ll be fine.”

—9—

A FEW DAYS after Kanata defeated Mother, Naiarotop stared at an array of windows into another dimension and tore out chunks of their hair. Images of Kanata were plastered across the display.
“What do I do now…?”
Naiarotop had given Mother the Moon of the Abyss. To be honest, it had been a longshot…but they’d sworn to the Higher God in upper management that they’d do something to get rid of Kanata Kanbara, and Mother had been the best thing Naiarotop could come up with on short notice. They were beginning to think the task was impossible. Kanata and Lunaère were far more powerful than they’d thought.
“This is it… This is the end of my rope. Urgh, how am I going to clean up this mess? Things were bad enough with Kanata Kanbara’s first Memory Sphere going around, but *now*…”
Naiarotop dropped their head into their hands and let out a heavy sigh.
As a Lower God working for a Higher God, Naiarotop’s failure was seen as their master’s failure. Naiarotop feared what kind of flack they would get for this last screwup.
Even before Kanata’s Memory Sphere was released, Locklore’s ratings had been dropping. Then disaster struck. What should have been a simple liquidation of a dud character—tossing Kanata into Cocytus to get eaten by

monsters—turned into a world-breaking nightmare. The dud turned into a stud! Now he threatened to undo years of world building and plot development. The fandom, though meager, was livid.
Flame wars were erupting on the popular social networking site, Gospl. Longtime fans were getting into heated arguments with trolls who were showing up to watch what a train wreck Locklore had become. Naiarotop's master was the highest trending hashtag, followed by Kanata. Gods had a lot of time on their hands to post about how Kanata was either ruining or saving the show.
"Well…they can't blame me. I wanted to take care of this decisively the moment it became a problem. That's right. I proposed the best option. But Master complained and made excuses with his old-fashioned way of thinking. 'Oh no! You cannot do this, you cannot do that,' he said… But somehow he expects me to do the impossible! And now the situation has grown worse."
Naiarotop cradled their head. They could have destroyed the Memory Sphere and Kanata in one fell swoop, but Naiarotop's master said they had to follow the rules. Whatever the solution to this problem ended up being, it would have to be by the book.
Locklore's format and gimmick included strict restrictions on allowable interferences with the world. The raw, uncensored, uncut footage was what got other gods interested. If they interfered—even once—it would shatter the premise and mean certain cancellation.
Naiarotop was well aware of this, but at this point, they were getting desperate. "Duuude… I'm going to get yelled at again. How could a single human give me all this trouble? I'm a god. A god!"
They moved one of the windows and checked the world's time. Time flow between dimensions was a mathematically complex thing, but the operating system did all the calculations for the Lesser God.
Naiarotop sighed. It had been nearly two hours since Kanata Kanbara's latest Memory Sphere was released. This was the peak time for people to insult Locklore on Gospl.
"Uuugh… Let's see what the damage is…"
Naiarotop closed one eye and used their fingers to widen another window. Rows of alien characters flew by.
Gospl was going nuts.
>> Kanata's prolly OP.
>> It's kinda cool. Too many people get killed by pathetic enemies. Nice to see the change.
>> LOL if this keeps up the humanoid dragons will get rekt
>> OMG Lunaère's my dream waifu. Stay tsundere forever, Lunaère!
>> I hate Mitsuru. Kanata should beat her up lmao
As Naiarotop read Gospl, their tension started to drain.
"H-huh…? Have they accepted it?"

The complaints were few and far between. Instead, the fandom seemed to be coming around to the Kanata phenomenon.
Naiarotop's strained expression slowly turned into a smile. The threat of *downsizing* was growing smaller and smaller.
"My subject," came the voice of Naiarotop's master.
Naiarotop smiled and pointed to the window into another dimension. "Look, Master! Take a look at Gospl! K-Kanata's actually become popular! Even the new watchers may end up fans after this!"
"You fool, do you really have such a shallow understanding of things?"
"What…?"
A chill swept across Naiarotop.
"Kanata Kanbara has only been accepted because you, other Lower Gods, and myself put in a lot of work. We got ahead of the crisis. Now what happens when Kanbara destroys all the other demon kings and humanoid dragons?"
"B-b-but… Look! Isn't this good?"
"Oh, who cares about the idiots on Gospl?" said the master.
Naiarotop shut their mouth and bit their lip.
"I can't believe you would send the Moon of the Abyss into Locklore to try to fix this," continued the master. "At best, you acted in the gray area of permissible maneuvers. And all for nothing! That *was* you, right? Or do you want me to think someone else handed that to a demon king?"
"I-I understand what you're saying, Master. But you were quite angry when your name started trending on Gospl. How was I to know you didn't care?"
"My name was trending because of your bumbling mistake."
"Didn't I say that I would go to Locklore and clean this up myself?"
Naiarotop squared their shoulders and took a deep breath. "If you care that much about the balance, you should have let me do as I suggested! You take all the credit when something goes right and put all the blame on me when something goes wrong! Well, it must be nice to be you!"
That was it. Naiarotop knew they'd be downsized, but they would have said their piece. Their fear was replaced with self-righteous anger. Yes, they'd made a mistake, but instead of being allowed to fix it, management had given them the runaround.
"Don't have a suggestion for that, do you?" Naiarotop continued, their emboldened voice trembling with anger. "Hah! If you can't stand me, if you want me to shut up, you should just downsize me and get it over with! But that won't downsize your failures, Master!"
"Hmm… Are you done, my subject? Our policy will not change. You will solve the Kanata Kanbara and Lunaère problem with the minimum amount of interference possible. You will use the tools already in place to their greatest potential. Bending the rules will not be tolerated unless it results in Kanbara and Lunaère's destruction. If you cannot do this…you are the one who will be destroyed," the Higher God said in annoyance. Then their voice cut off.

Their master's presence faded.
"D-dammit! Damn you, Kanata Kanbara!"
In their fury, Naiarotop kicked away one of the windows near their feet before curling into a fetal position.

—10—

IN A ROOM with four stone walls, two men sat on either side of a table, looking at one another. Two subordinates flanked each man, eyeing their counterparts suspiciously. Weapons were sheathed, but ready.
One of the seated men was a giant with a receding hairline and a glassy-eyed stare, his arm thicker than most men's waists. This was Bosgin, leader of a band of thieves called the Cup of Blood. With more than fifty members, they were a large-scale criminal organization that preyed on hapless adventurers. Members operated independently, aside from the occasional meetup to report information back to the leadership. Their strength was feared, with their powerful members rivaling A-rank adventurers in strength.
The air was thick with tension as Bosgin spoke. "You know this already, but I ain't interested in a fight. Something's come up that we can't handle on our own. We want your help."
Bosgin crossed his arms while the man across from him grinned and put his feet up on the table.
"Is that right?" asked the other man. "I don't think killing each other here would be a bad option, would it?"
"This bastard's making fun of us!" said one of Bosgin's subordinates, reaching for his sword.
The giant moved with unnatural swiftness, backhanding his underling into the stone wall. The sword clattered uselessly to the ground.
"Sorry 'bout my lackey's mouth. Let's keep talkin'." Bosgin bowed his head in apology.
"You know I wasn't joking," said the other man. "Bosgin, you're one of the strongest people in this country…someone who could actually fight on even ground against me. With that kind of power, it should've been easy for you to live a proper life as an adventurer and still get your fill of thrills. Why'd you choose this path instead? It's because you thirst for blood, isn't it?"
Bosgin shook his head. "Gimme a break. My level ain't even that high, and I ain't drunk on violence like you. All I want is to get what's mine and lay low. That's it. Don't lump me in with you."
The other man let out a sigh, his interest waning. "Bosgin, you're showing Cup of Blood's true colors. Level is just one indicator of strength. I don't give up in despair just because I know my opponent is a higher level. Instead, I rise to the challenge and reap the rewards."
"Stop tryin' to provoke me. Besides, you got a different opponent."

“Oh?”
“Let’s get down to business. My guys in the Cup of Blood brought me some intel. The Red Rod of Authority is an item that’s been kept in storage at the king’s castle. It was first used by a traveler from another world hundreds of years ago. They’re gonna bring it out soon.”
“Are you sure about that? I don’t think the royal family would do something like that without reason.”
“You’re right.” Bosgin nodded. “Ain’t been nobody who can use the Red Rod for a while now; that’s why they had it holed up in the treasury. You gotta have a contract with a powerful spirit to be able to wield it. Just been a fancy stick since that traveler who used it died forever ago.”
“So, why now?”
“There’s an S-rank adventurer in Manaloch, the City of Magic. She’s called Aries’s Hand Kotone. She can ignore requirements for using a weapon. You do the math. I bet the royal family’s sending a retainer to Manaloch to give the staff over to her.”
Both men knew that region had suffered a great deal of damage from monsters in recent years. Recently, there had even been an incident with a demon king recently. Despite some unreliable rumors about a C-rank white mage, it was common knowledge that Kotone had contributed greatly to the demon king’s defeat. The royals would have heard about that, and they probably wanted to use the rod as an incentive to keep Kotone from wandering off. Word on the street was that she just wanted to retire.
“Without the Aries’s Hand, the Red Rod of Authority is basically just a decoration, but there’s plenty of rich collectors who want that kind of art in their display case. You get what I’m sayin’?” said Bosgin.
The other man grinned. “I see. You plan to snatch the Red Rod—but Kotone is a tough mark. That’s what you’re getting at?”
“Yeah…that’s about it. But with your help, Lovis, and your people, I bet we could go toe to toe with the Aries’s Hand. Obviously, I’ll lend you some of my people too,” said Bosgin.
Lovis leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms in satisfaction.

“I get it. And I’m in. But I don’t need any help from you. You just rough up Manaloch when the time comes and try not to get in our way. Ha ha… So, my next opponent is the Aries’s Hand? Not bad.” Lovis stood and turned away from Bosgin. “We’ll do this with just the three of us. Let’s hurry to Manaloch, Yozakura, Damia.”
“Yes, sir,” replied Yozakura as Damia nodded twice.
“We might not be the only ones goin’ after the Red Rod,” said Bosgin. “Watch your back.”
“Are you talking to me?” said Lovis with a wave of his arm, though he didn’t turn back. “Let me be clear. I came here today with every intention of killing you, Bosgin. My Black Reapers haven’t gone soft like your Cup of Blood. Our teeth are still sharp.”

Bonus Story:
The Lich's Surveillance and Pomera, the Drunk

MUCH TO MY DISMAY, we were still in the Red Bat.

Pomera was completely drunk, her face as red as an apple. I kept trying to find ways to cut her off, and she kept ordering more cider.

Philia was sitting on Pomera's lap while Pomera rubbed her head, cheeks, and chin. Philia let it continue and seemed to be enjoying it.

"Lishen, Philia, Kanata's a hor-horrible person, don't you think? I jusht asked him to m-marry me, and he ignored the whole thing!" Pomera pouted and glared at me with unfocused eyes.

That conversation had happened a while ago. It seemed she thought that the nickname Holy Fist Pomera had doomed her chances of ever getting married. I'd tried to chalk it up to random drunk talk and let it go, but she kept circling back to it.

"P-Pomera-san, drink some water. No, not cider. I don't think you should have anymore alcohol."

"Ah! Look! He jusht changed the topic again! Did you hear that, Philia? Kanata's so mean! It'd hurt if he jusht said no to my face, but he's making it worse by avoiding the topic because he doesn't want to marry me! That's the third time, third time! The third time he's avoided it in the same way! Kanata thinks it's fine cause I'm drunk! Philia, you tell him he's mean too!"

While I'd thought her mental faculties had gone out the window, she apparently still had full access to her memory. I cradled my head in my hands, my elbows on the table. I was never going to let Pomera drink again. I had no idea how to deal with plastered Pomera. The other customers and tavern workers were looking at her like she had gone nuts. If she was worried about her reputation, then the drinking was doing more damage than taking credit for Philia's big arms.

"Philia loves Kanata! Philia will be Kanata's bride too!" said Philia, raising her hands happily from where she sat in Pomera's arms.

"Philia, you're so cute and innocent. But you can't! Because you're gonna be my bride! I won't let you get away!" Pomera tickled Philia again, and the girl giggled happily and waved her arms and legs about. I just prayed that this nightmare would end as quickly as possible.

"Philia loves Pomera too!" said Philia. "Philia will marry Pomera! Does that mean we're both brides?"

"Waaaait…you can change shape Philia…" said Pomera, her eyes widening with a sudden thought. "Could you look like Kanata for me? Then we'd be bride and groom! You can console me because Kanata rejected me."

"Oh, come on! That's just gross!" This was just too much for me to handle.

"P-Pomera-san, please, come back to your senses!"

It was no use. Drunk Pomera had no brakes.

“I feel bad being the only person drinking,” said Pomera. “Philia, have some of my drink.”
“Yay! Drinks!”
“W-wait! We can’t let other people see this! Please stop, Pomera-san!” I said.
Technically speaking, Philia was a couple thousand years older than the legal drinking age. I still wasn’t sure if Locklore *had* a legal drinking age. But it wasn’t something that I wanted to explain to everyone else in the tavern.
Pomera pouted and plunked her chin on the table. “Fine, then *you* should drink with me, Kanata. I’m lonely. I’m lonely and drunk.”
“…I don’t *like* being drunk.”
“Oh, come onnn! You shaid you felt bad about the whole demon king thing, so you’d come with me to do whatever I wanted! Philia, I’ve been betrayed by Kanata again! I left Arroburg, where I’d lived my whole life, and I believed in Kanata. And then he betraysh me like this!” Pomera started sobbing, but it seemed like she was faking it.
It still hurt to be accused of betrayal. “ F-fine. I’ll drink a little. Waiter, could we get another glass—”
Pomera suddenly gulped down all the water that had been in my glass, then picked up the cider jug on the table and poured me a refill.
“Hee hee hee… I had an indirect kiss with Kanata,” I heard her whisper to herself. “Look, I poured you a drink! Let’s drink the night away, Kanata!”
Just then, there was a loud sound outside. It almost sounded like something dragging across the wall. Was some drunk stumbling home?
The waiter looked at us with dead eyes. It seemed like he didn’t want us sitting there all night any more than I did. I tried to signal to him with my expression that I’d somehow get her to go home at an acceptable time. He just frowned and turned away.
After a while, I finished my drink. Pomera poured me another. I finished that one…and she poured me another.
It just kept going.
Apparently gaining levels didn’t stop you from getting drunk. I was feeling quite tipsy.
“Hee hee, I’m so happy right now… I love alcohol, and I love Kanata, and I love Philia…” said Pomera in a sing-song voice as she hugged Philia with one arm and the cider jug with the other.
“Pomera-san, we should head back soon…” I said.
I tried to stand and take her arm, but my feet were unsteady. I wavered and fell toward Pomera. She quickly let the cider jug fall to the floor and wrapped her arms around me.
“Ah… Sorry, Pomera-san. Looks like I’m kinda drunk too,” I said.
I looked at Pomera. Our faces were very close together. Her eyes had a faraway look and her cheeks seemed a little redder than before. She suddenly closed her eyes and brought her face even closer to mine.

“W-wait, Pomera-san… What are you…?”
I was caught off guard. Pomera’s face came closer and closer. Her lips were about to touch mine, and…the world stopped.
The next thing I remember, I was sitting back in my chair. Pomera’s head lay on the table, sleeping comfortably.
“Pomera-san? What? Huh…? What just…happened?”
Weird. I could have sworn Pomera was just about to kiss me. I’m drunk too though… Maybe it was a dream?
Philia was pale as a sheet, her eyes glued on the window.
“Philia-chan? What’s wrong?” I asked.
“Ph-Philia didn’t see anything!” she said, shaking her head vigorously.
“O-okay… Let’s take Pomera and go home.”

***

“That Pomera! She’s so forward and flirty with Kanata!” Lunaère looked into the Red Bat through a side window, spying on Kanata and Pomera. She wasn’t proud of it, but if that was what it took to make sure nothing started between the two adventuring companions, then so be it. Especially tonight. Humans made all sorts of mistakes once they had a little alcohol. That was how…*relationships* got started.
“How dare she! She even told him to marry her a moment ago! I knew it!” Lunaère bit her fingernails as she glared at Pomera. Then she pulled the hem of her hood down to hide her grimacing face.
Her breathing was ragged from sheer emotional distress. She tried desperately to get herself under control, but she had been so *angry* when Pomera drank from Kanata’s glass and had an indirect kiss with him that she’d raked her nails across the wall, leaving deep gouges in the plaster.
Then disaster struck. Kanata pulled on Pomera’s arm to try and get her to stand up. He slipped and fell over onto the white mage.
It ended with the couple locked in a fumbling embrace. They stared into each other’s eyes at point-blank range. Pomera looked vacantly at Kanata, closed her eyes, and brought her face in for a kiss. Their lips moved closer and closer.
“Space-Time Magic Level 25: Ruler of the World!”
It was one of the highest-level spells Lunaère could use. A massive black and white magic circle appeared, and time left the world. Only Lunaère was free to move or even think, but she could only maintain the spell for a short duration since it drained her magic power quickly.
That was still plenty of time for Lunaère to open the window, leap inside, pick up Kanata, return him to his seat, and make a swift exit.
The spell cut out as she was passing back through the opened window. As Lunaère turned to close the sash, Philia glanced in her direction. Their eyes met.

Philia stared at Lunaère with a shocked expression. Lunaère glared back, placing a finger to her lips to make the universal gesture for *keep quiet*. Then she left, carefully pushing on the window frame to close it without a sound.
“Crisis averted,” she said to herself, letting out a small sigh of relief.

Afterword

IT'S NEKOKO, the author! Thank you so much for buying *Disciple of the Lich*, Volume 2!

On the cover, we have Pomera, Kanata, and Philia! Yet again, the illustrator's drawings are so cool! I really love Philia's design, so I'm happy to see her on the cover this time. And Holy Fist Pomera is as beautiful as ever!

Actually, if you look behind them, there's someone else staring at them. Did you notice?

New panels appeared for major characters, including Rosemonde, Kotone, and Lily, the youngest daughter! All the characters look so cool—and cute. It makes me so happy. Watching the cover, character designs, and inside illustrations come to life is the most exciting part of turning my story into a book.

Other than Lily, I might end up letting spoilers slip if I wrote about the rest of the characters too much, so I won't say anything other than that I'm looking forward to everything they'll do!

Just to let you know again, we're working on turning the *Disciple of the Lich* into a manga! It's available for free on Overlap, Inc.'s web manga website, *Comic Gardo*! Please go and take a look!

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